

DARK, DARK MY LIGHT



R. A. Johnston

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'Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire'

Theodore Roethke 'In A Dark Time'

CHAPTER 1

Arielle clutched the jacket of the powerful and ruthless being who propelled her through the night without effort. She felt the wind rushing by, blowing through her long hair and whirling it about the two of them like a living rope. It should have been cold, but she felt nothing beyond the coolness of her own skin. She kept her head tightly pressed against his chest and tried not to think of what would shortly follow. She focused on the sensation of being suspended in mid air. *I've always wanted to fly, she thought.*

She glanced at the lights below her, and beyond the rushing wind she heard the heartbeats, the thousands of human and inhuman hearts that beat on, unaware of the danger that lurked above them. She was silent as she glimpsed the landmarks below: the buildings, the parks, the CN tower. He flew past the city limits, over rural land, lakes and rivers, silent trees, and the distant lights of small houses. She strained to isolate individual sounds, but she was unable to separate the noise. On this, the second night of her new existence, she was beginning to understand what it really meant.

All too soon, they landed at his house. The silent walled garden was an excellent shield against curious eyes. He opened the back door after unlocking it, and ushered her inside. She stared at the leather couch that she had slept on the night before, and swallowed convulsively. What would he do now?

LaCroix crossed over to his expensive stereo equipment and put on some Celtic music, ethereal and haunting. She walked across the beautifully inlaid hardwood floor and looked around again at the beautiful furniture and objet d'art. His taste was, as always, impeccable. His shoes made no sound as he walked across the floor.

Arielle sat on the floor next to the speakers, letting it run over her. She could now hear so much further in the tonal range, and she could even feel the impulses. No wonder LaCroix loved music so much. She closed her eyes and let the low notes reverberate in her head.

"It's wonderful, this Celtic material. Ageless. Timeless," LaCroix commented, seating himself in the recliner near her.

"Yes," she said softly, unconsciously moving slightly away from him. The music faded as his closeness caused her already strained nerves to stretch toward the breaking point. If he did anything, she was sure she would break apart into little insignificant pieces.

He smiled at her, his eyes knowing, as he reached out and pulled her so that she leaned against the armrest of the chair, close to him, but not touching.

"Just music now, Arielle. We have all night."

She wondered how the master vampire was able to convey such menace in the simplest of words, or such meaning in the briefest of glances. Her new vampire senses were awakening, but her heart, which should have been beating so very slowly, raced like the mortal heartbeat she had once had.

"Remnants of your mortality, Arielle. They will fade soon enough."

She trembled, fear of him, fear of the unknown, fear of herself warring within her. *What if I like killing? What if I become what he is? What if...* Her thoughts were interrupted by LaCroix as he reached out to tilt her face to his. He easily read the thoughts she could not yet express.

"So many worries, Arielle. And I thought Nicolas had the guilt of the world on his shoulders. It must be hereditary."

LaCroix let the music create its magic, and for a long time there was silence between them. Then LaCroix reached out and pulled her up as he rose from his chair. No warning, just a smooth, unhurried gesture that was fluidly elegant. She swallowed as she realized that his patience had run out. Crossing to the couch, he set her down on it and then moved to sit beside her. His hand tangled in her hair again, turning her face to his.

"So much yet to learn, Arielle. This time I won't be interrupted."

She tried to look away, but his gaze held her fast.

"You know almost nothing of what this existence will be, Arielle, but you will learn. The only life you have is what I give you. Remember that."

She shivered, finally pulling her face from his hand, knowing that she did so only with his permission. His hand stroked her long hair lightly, the way a father would. But he wasn't her father.

"You will find, Arielle, that I am difficult to please, and quick to anger. My nature, you see. Nicholas and Janette learned the hard way, what it meant to displease me. I trust you won't be as foolish?"

The fear washed back, like an inexorable ocean tide. Did he enjoy that, making her afraid? Stupid question.

He smiled again, reading the thoughts on her face.

"After tonight, you will be mine forever. Nicolas will have no claim on you, and you will have no claim on mortality. Your choice, if you recall. You agreed this was what you wanted."

"For Nick..." she whispered, and his face tightened slightly, then became inscrutable once more.

"Yes, for Nicolas. You would have even given up your life for him, someone you met only months ago. What is it, I wonder, that inspired you to

make such a choice? What is it about him that you would sacrifice everything? Is it love, Arielle?"

Arielle stared at him. "I love him," she said softly, "but not the way you think."

His lips tightened, but he said nothing. His eyes were opaque and expressionless. She swallowed again as she waited for...something. If only he would get it over with, whatever torture or humiliation he had planned, then she could breathe again.

I'm scared, Dad. Even Stan didn't do this to me. Help me, Daddy. Help me...

He pulled her closer, tipped her head to expose her throat, and the memory of his punishment on the rooftop coming back to her. His fangs slashing into her neck, draining her, and the horrible pain that had enveloped her. She struggled to pull away, panicked, but his grip on her tightened.

"Ah, no, Arielle. No need for this. This won't be like last time."

She strained against him, her disbelief of his words evident in every muscle in her body.

"You don't believe me? Well, I suppose nothing will convince you, so we'll let the deed speak for itself."

She couldn't get away, and the heartbeat in her ears was her own, drumming frantically, blocking out everything except the sick feeling of entrapment. There was no escape. He turned her head slightly to look into her face, and his glowing eyes wound her in a golden net, drawing her deeper to the ocean floor in his blue eyes. The net pulled at her with gossamer fine threads, tangling her carefully, holding her still for the images that filled her head. She saw smoky candles, smelled the burning wax. The cold stones of the catacombs were under her hands, at her back. And all around her, the black of night....

There was a dark deliberation in his movements as he touched her, a practiced seduction. He had done this many, many times before, but underneath the sensuality there was a gentleness that slowly calmed her racing pulse, and quelled the sick feeling in her stomach. She knew he was controlling her mind and projecting his will on her, but there was no fighting. She closed her eyes as the calm surrounded her.

He guided her mouth to his neck, and she bit blindly, reflexively. The taste of his blood swirled more images in her head, all dark and exquisitely delicate. The sensation was indescribable. *Something mortals would never know, she thought dimly.*

He stopped her after what seemed mere seconds, then his mouth descended to her neck, and his fangs cut into her carotid artery. Pain, but so much more. She could feel him in her head. His entire being was now moving through her, flowing through her arteries and veins, stopping in her heart and

exploding out in a shimmer of darkness so bright it nearly blinded her. Then she fell into the dark sea, and let it carry her down into nothingness.

LaCroix studied the unconscious young vampire in his arms, his expression wavering between bemusement and triumph. *My gift to you, Fleur. What we should have had, this one night for us.* He laid her down on his bed and settled next to her, surrounding her. They slept as the dawn approached.

Nick drove to the scene of yet another murder, his thoughts concentrated on the mortal cares around him. His radio was tuned to CERK by habit, the familiar voice both hated and comforting. *Why do I do this to myself*, he wondered. *This is masochistic, to let him get to me like this.*

"Tonight, gentle listeners, we shall talk about rebirth. What does it mean to be born into a new life? To have new experiences, to change formDo you remember, Nicolas, when you crossed over?"

Nicolas's hands tightened on the steering wheel. Arielle had been 'created' only days before and already the master vampire taunted him. His eyes tried to focus on the traffic ahead, but the memories drew him back.

Nicolas knelt on the bed, bewildered, staring at the strange man who had moved into the room. He didn't understand why the man professed that they would be close friends. Janette stood there, silent but expectant. The tall pale haired man moved closer to him. Nicolas shrank away from the hypnotic eyes that glowed yellow, no less terrifying than the teeth that had seemed to elongate into fangs. The man held Nicolas by the shoulders, his eyes swirling and trapping him, showing images of heaven, of hell, and unending night.

"All these things I give to you. Power, wealth, and eternal life, but you must make this choice of your own free will."

Nicolas's mouth was dry, wavering between the yearning to accept that dizzying power he sensed in the creature before him and the need to repel something he knew was damned and unholy.

The creature sent more thoughts into his head, of the omnipotence he would share if Nicolas consented to this depravity. He, a soldier of God!

"You must choose, Nicolas. I will teach you this new existence, but you will always answer to me. You are mine."

Nicolas found he couldn't think, couldn't see anything but the images the demon held out for him. The man held him in thrall.

"What do you want of me?" he asked hoarsely, afraid of the possessive light in the man's eyes.

"Your life, Nicolas. Your heart, your mind, your body and soul. You will belong to me, my protégé, my son."

There was more than paternalistic emotion in the older man. No, not a man, and Nicolas shied away, afraid once more by this final step.

"Choose, Nicolas."

The darkness beckoned again. He would live forever, if he let this creature have his way. And what man didn't wish to live forever? Nicolas closed his eyes, awaiting whatever event would happen next, his muscles relaxing as he stopped resisting the siren call. He laid back and felt the man turn his head to the side and bare his neck.

Nicolas felt a terrible jolt as the fangs tore into him. He screamed silently. No! Stop! But the man paid no attention to the feeble struggles that Nicolas exerted. The pain was beyond anything he could imagine. Then the hurt faded, even as his body cooled and his heart slowed. Nicolas was dimly aware of the man's wrist being held to his mouth. He drank obediently, and the last remnants of sanity told him that he was not drinking wine, but it didn't matter. The taste brought him more ecstasy than any mortal pleasure. It was too late now to stop, for his body was dying. His senses were leaving him. The master's voice followed him down the dark well.

"Let go, Nicolas. You will wake again in a new life."

It was the last thing that Nicolas heard before all light was extinguished forever.

Nick swerved to avoid the oncoming car as he was jerked back into the present, now on the wrong side of the road. He swore, his hands shaking. How could he forget the pleasure he had experienced surrendering to LaCroix's will, the years he reveled in the killing, until he realized what his existence was, ruled by the master above him and Janette. He could not return to that life, not when mortality was close to his grasp. Nat was so sure that she would find a cure. But how easy it would be to yield to LaCroix, let him take control of his life, take care of him.... *No! That could never be. Never again.*

Not far away, Arielle was dreaming. She stood on an old stone bridge that spanned some unknown chasm shrouded by fog. Water, perhaps, but she couldn't see through the mist. It was gray, like dusk, enough to see faint images but not light enough to recognize them. A single torch lit the area where she stood. She stood half-way between the two towers linked by the bridge, and tried to discern what they were. Nicolas stood on one side, waiting, and LaCroix on the other. She could hear both of them call to her. She had to choose. And then the dream faded away, leaving nothingness in its place.

CHAPTER 2

It was dusk when Arielle awoke. She blinked rapidly as she took in her surroundings. She was lying in a king sized bed with silk sheets. The elaborately carved headboard looked like something from a palace. Ornate and beautiful. The entire house was filled with antiques and artifacts that would be better housed in a museum. LaCroix collected beautiful things of all kinds. *Even people*, thought Arielle, the images of Nicolas and Janette flashing briefly through her mind.

She sat up abruptly as LaCroix walked into the room. He was in his usual elegant clothes, black, of course, and he leaned against the pillar at the foot of the bed as he regarded her with quizzical eyes.

"Did you sleep well, my dear?"

She clutched the covers as she watched him with wide eyes. What did you say after what had happened last night? He stood there, the epitome of cool sophistication. He had probably been born with that casual elegance, and the vampire had only refined it. She felt her face heat with humiliation. She turned away, unable to bear the mocking look in his eyes.

He was beside her in an instant, tilting her face up.

"Why so ashamed, Arielle? Do you think what happened was wrong?"

She couldn't look at him, and tried to jerk away. His hand tightened on her chin just short of pain and she stilled instantly. She must never forget that his indulgence was exactly that: indulgence. They both knew who was in charge of the situation. Her mouth opened, closed, opened again, as she tried to express something coherent. What should she say? *I feel cheap, damned, stupid for even thinking about him. He probably knows exactly what I feel about him. What if he reads minds and knows what I'm thinking now? That I enjoyed it. Dear God, I enjoyed it....*

LaCroix's eyes narrowed, that mobile eyebrow shooting up in a now familiar gesture. Then he smiled.

"Are you saying you didn't like it, Arielle?" his voice a silken whisper.

She bit her lower lip, her eyes welling up with red haze, and LaCroix felt a twinge of remorse at her stricken look, then quelled it ruthlessly. He stared at the small pale face before him, and long suppressed memories surfaced from his human past. Things he thought had long been lost or willfully eradicated. Mortal things that he never would experience again.

Bringing my humanity back to me, Fleur?

With an almost physical wrench he jerked back to the present. There was no point in this, as life had changed irrevocably. He would never again be that innocent and uncomplicated. Arielle still watched him warily, drawing back as he reached out to touch her. His eyes narrowed further.

Pull away from me, will you?

His anger shaded his eyes gold, his hand tangled in her hair as he jerked her to him, his fangs moved to her neck. The small whimper stopped him cold. She had not uttered a sound until now. His hold loosened, and he allowed her to pull away. His eyes regained their normal blue shade and his face lost all expression.

"I must tend to some business tonight. You will come with me."

"Where?" she asked timidly, then nearly choked on the question when she saw the glacial coldness in his eyes.

He ignored the question. "Be ready in fifteen minutes."

She fled to the bathroom and closed the door and locked it. It was a futile gesture as LaCroix could twist the lock open without even thinking about it, but it gave her an illusion of safety. She showered quickly and washed her long black hair. It felt odd to be performing the same rituals she had done when she was mortal. Wrapped in an enormous bath robe, she dug around in the cabinet until she located a hair dryer. Working quickly, she managed to get most of the moisture out of her hair, then stepped back out into the bedroom. She only had the clothes she had worn on her last night of mortality. The blood stains still hadn't come out all the way. She looked into the spare closet to try to find garments, but it was empty. At that moment, LaCroix walked into the room.

"Still not ready?" he inquired with polite tones.

"I...I can't find my clothes," she stammered.

"Oh, those," he said dismissively, "I threw them out. I have taken the liberty of purchasing a new wardrobe for you. Janette was most helpful in that regard."

Arielle's eyes grew twice the size. He bought her new clothes, picked out by Janette? Remembering the exquisite designer clothes the tall elegant vampiress wore, she almost choked. She could never wear that kind of clothing. With dread, she watched as LaCroix opened the master dressing room door and revealed dresses, suits, casual clothes, all tasteful and chic yet more than suitable for her youth and small frame.

She touched one after another, marveling at the silk and velvet textures, the rougher cotton, and the brilliant colors. They were beautiful.

"She has fine taste, doesn't she?" LaCroix said softly, amusement tugging at him at the wonder in her face.

"I don't need..." she protested weakly, only to be interrupted.

"Of course you do, my dear. You are mine and will dress accordingly."

It was then that she noticed that her new clothes hung side by side LaCroix's tailored outfits and suits. She was sharing a closet with a vampire, a thought that almost made her giggle in hysteria, only it was much more than that. Blood perspiration beaded her forehead as she felt a wave of dizziness. This wasn't just moving in with some man, something her mother

would have hated, but surrendering her soul. She gritted her teeth, willing the sick feeling to subside as she clutched the door for support. *I made my choice. I have to live with it.*

LaCroix's sharp eyes took in the further blanching of her pale face, and reached out to grasp her neck. She stilled any movement, waiting for the recrimination, but it didn't come.

"Choose your clothing, Arielle. You have five minutes."

He left her alone. She grabbed a silk outfit in a claret red and dressed quickly. A drawer held undergarments of every style and hue, including some things she had never even seen before. Janette must have cleared out an entire store. She dressed with grim determination, her gaze avoiding the other drawer with lingerie. She wasn't ready to face that. Low slung black pumps completed her outfit. She looked...older. She regarded her reflection in the mirror. She was different now. Paler, features more tightly drawn, but at least she could still see her own reflection. The books and movies hadn't gotten that one right, it seemed.

She stepped out to meet LaCroix's calm gaze. "Quite adequate, my dear."

He helped her into a long black wool coat and they walked out the back door.

"Ready to fly?" he asked as he stared down at his young disciple.

She closed her eyes as he wrapped her in his arms and they rose into the night sky. Sheltered against him, she peered briefly down at the city below them, then closed her eyes again. They arrived at their destination within minutes.

Arielle entered the Raven with LaCroix, the music overwhelmed her again. They moved through the people on the dance floor, but this time there was something else present besides the mortal heartbeats.

Her eyes widened. "There are others here," she stated, looking at LaCroix with shock.

He smiled slightly, "Of course. There always were. Only now you can sense it."

She looked around, searching for Janette's familiar figure. Why LaCroix had insisted she come here with him, she did not know. She knew he had a job at a radio station and would have to work this night, but he could have just left her at his house. She knew better than to try to run. She would never escape him.

Janette looked up to see the two figures approaching her, one calm and assured, the other a little wan and withdrawn.

"Janette, so good to see you again" he murmured with a little bow, kissing her hand with his usual charm. Janette's eyes flashed a bit, but she kept her voice even.

"To what do I owe this honor?" she asked.

LaCroix smiled as he leaned against the bar, his hand resting possessively on Arielle's shoulder. Janette could not blame the child for acting like a bewildered puppy and it made her angry.

"I have business to attend to, Janette. I need for you to keep an eye on Arielle for me. She's too new to this life to run unchecked. Who know what trouble she could find herself in?"

With those words, he casually stroked Arielle's cheek with the back of his fingers and the young vampire shuddered a bit. Arielle held herself still, not knowing if he was angry or indulgent. She did not wish to antagonize him.

"You will take care of her for me, won't you, my dear?"

It wasn't a request, Janette knew.

"Yes," she said tightly. She regretted her harshness when she saw the hurt in Arielle's eyes.

"Then I shall leave her to your tender care, Janette. I will be back before sunrise for her. Please do not try anything foolish."

The warning was given in a light voice, but the words carried LaCroix's usual menace. No one would dare cross him.

Both women watched LaCroix's tall figure moving away from them through the crowd, unconscious grace in every movement. Janette watched Arielle's expressive face, seeing the conflicting emotions as they watched the master vampire who now ruled them both.

"He is magnificent in his way, isn't he?" Janette commented softly, her own memories stirring at the bewilderment on Arielle's face. *And you are much more innocent now than I was when LaCroix sought me out.*

"'In him inexplicably mix'd appear'd much to be loved and hated, sought and fear'd'" * Janette quoted softly, her own memories coming back to her as she recalled the helpless attraction she had felt for LaCroix.

"Who said that?" Arielle asked in a small voice.

"Byron, I believe," Janette answered, then turned old, wise eyes on LaCroix's newest protege. Arielle looked frail and more human still than Janette would care to admit. Her mortality clung to her tenaciously.

"Are you thirsty, my dear? I have some excellent vintage," Janette asked after a small pause. Arielle gagged. Her hunger was burning at the thought of whose blood was mixed in the glass that Janette held. *She could not do it, she could not....*

"What is it, Arielle?" Janette asked in concern.

Arielle looked away, unable to bear the sympathy in Janette's eyes.

"You don't have to tell me anything you don't wish to, but it might help to talk about it, woman to woman."

* Byron, George Gordon 'Lara'

"I can't," Arielle gritted out. She swallowed against the tears rising in her throat, and looked into Janette's eyes, searching for whatever memories lingered there. Try as she might, she could not decipher what was in those blue eyes.

Janette had been brought across with dark promises, but it was not until much later that she realized just how cunning LaCroix had been, luring her into a web of darkness that would bind her eternally to him. Mortal, vampire, it made no difference now. She had exchanged one form of bondage for another. The vampirism itself was as intoxicating now as it always had been, eternal youth, eternal strength, eternal beauty. But freedom? No, that it wasn't.

Her first night in the brothel serving mortal men had been disgusting, frightening and painful, but LaCroix had surpassed that. She killed for sustenance, sometimes for pleasure of the hunt, but never for the glimpses of rage she had seen from time to time in her master's eyes. He carried more demons in him than she could ever hope to fathom. Charming, seductive, cruel, passionate, cold, brilliant and obsessed. *I can't help you, Arielle, though I wish I could. Pray you never find out what heights his fury can reach.* Janette sipped her wine and stared off into space, then her lips curved in a small bitter smile. She seemed lost in her own memories, and after giving Arielle a preoccupied nod, Janette moved to the bar to speak to Miklos in a low tone. Arielle watched her with frustration. What had happened in the past? Why didn't they just tell her what had happened, instead of her having to guess? Arielle stood near a pillar, eyes focused far away, toying with the silver necklace she wore. She didn't see Janette's speculative glance.

If you only knew what heritage you hold in your hand, Arielle. Did Fleur really come back in you, or is it only Nicola's and LaCroix's shared madness that created this obsession? My condolences, cherie, for getting caught up in his mad fancy. Whatever he might promise you, do not lose your heart to him. He no longer has one to give you in return.

Janette took another swallow of her wine and leaned back against Miklos as he carefully massaged her neck. She closed her eyes and let the bartender dissipate some of her tension.

Arielle watched the crowd dancing in the club. It all seemed so surreal. There were mortal heartbeats, but she could sense the others. She wondered if any other humans besides Natalie knew of their existence. *Here there be dragons*, she thought bemusedly. Then a hand came down on her shoulder. She stiffened immediately, every instinct preparing for flight as she recalled her fateful encounter with LaCroix in the park. Turning, she saw the handsome face of a young man in his twenties. Well, at least outwardly. There was no mortal heartbeat there.

"Dance?" he invited with an engaging grin which reminded her much of Nicolas. She hesitated. Then solemnly reached out her hand. As if she were spun glass, the vampire led her to the dance floor. His eyes were much older than his face.

"You're new here," he commented as they moved to the pulsing beat.

"Yes," she said softly, prompting the vampire to smile.

"Ah, new here and... new in general? When were you...?"

"Not long ago," she said, low enough that even his vampire keen hearing had to strain to catch the words.

"A baby!" he said with a laugh, but it was teasing, not cruel. "I've got about 50 years on you."

She nodded politely, but did not smile. Strange, how tense her features were. Most young vampires reveled in their new found powers. They danced for what seemed an interminable length of time, the Gothic music drowning out her thoughts. Arielle wanted to forget for a time. Then she stiffened again, gazed toward the door with apprehension, but there was nothing there to alarm her. Until they heard his voice.

"Arielle, something told me you would borrow trouble."

She stood stricken as LaCroix moved to take her hand from the hapless young vampire.

"Hey, buddy," the vampire protested, then got the full force of the sky-blue eyes turned in his direction. Blue ice. This was not just an Old One, he was an Ancient. If vampires could lose bladder control, then the young one would have been watering the dance floor. He stared mutely at the elder, trying to think of something to deflect the wrath he glimpsed in the master vampire's eyes.

"I didn't mean..." he stuttered.

"Yes, I'm sure you didn't," LaCroix said in frigidly polite tones. "This one is **mine**. You will be so kind as to pass the word to the others?"

The young vampire all but scraped and bowed at his narrow escape and fled from the floor. Arielle shivered again. LaCroix was so powerful that displays like this were almost meaningless to him.

She waited tensely for the next stage of his anger, every muscle tensed for the inevitable. LaCroix's eyes were once again opaque and unreadable. He drew her into his arms as the beat changed to a slow, intense rhythm. Trapped in his arms and held tightly against him, they danced as they had once before. Confused and frightened, she opened her mouth to question him, but he laid an admonishing finger across her lips. She immediately stopped her attempt at conversation but still stared worriedly up into his face. What did he want?

"Dance, Arielle," he commanded her softly. She moved obediently to his lead, laid her head against his suit jacket and closed her eyes. Perhaps, for a little while, she could pretend she was safe. Just for a while. Janette watched from the bar and bit her lip.

I'm sorry, Arielle. So, so sorry.

Then she slipped back into the past without warning.

After that satisfying first night, Janette had risen to find herself alone. Davio had died like the dog he was, and now she could seek retribution from the others, who still frequented the whore house. Oh, not the nameless men who had paid for her favors the last few years, but those first men, who had so hurt and frightened an innocent young girl. They would pay with their lives.

With a callous disregard for who might see her, she swooped on each in turn, draining them and breaking their necks in front of several horrified witnesses. They crossed themselves against the demon who wore Janette's body, but she was not interested in them. Her pregnant friend had died and the others were nothing to her. They were not important. After her sixth kill, she wiped her mouth delicately, then stiffened as she heard the growl behind her.

Whirling, she saw LaCroix, his eyes yellow and fangs extended.

"So you couldn't wait for your revenge, could you, my dear? How unfortunate that the young are so impetuous and foolish. One must learn a certain discretion in both feeding and revenge, and unfortunately, you have not. You are mine, Janette, and you will do only as I say. Perhaps I had better teach you proper obedience, lest you think that your wishes could supersede mine."

The look in his eyes dried Janette's mouth to dust. Never had she seen such absolute fury. And the sun was about to rise. She could feel the encroaching day. Nowhere to run, and no escape. He was beside her in an instant, and she couldn't move, pinned by his gaze.

"My Lord, please," she begged, only to realize that no pleas would aid her cause.

Then her panic broke through the immobility. Too terrified to realize the foolishness of her actions, she turned to flee out the window through the courtyard. The rising sun caught her a glancing beam across her arm, and she screamed in pain. Her flesh blistered and bubbled as she ran, so intent on escaping the demon behind her that she was unaware that he was letting her run from him. She tumbled into the cellar after prying open the door, now needing to get away from the burning light as well. She stumbled and fell against the far wall, only to realize that a high window allowed a good portion of the stone room to be lit by that deadly sun. It also cut off her escape to the

other door. When she turned, LaCroix stood not ten paces from her, his back against the now closed door.

"Not much of choice, is it, ma petite? The tiger or the light. Which do think will be kinder?"

She swallowed, then edged closer to the light, crying out as it singed her face.

LaCroix advanced slightly, then stood to eye her with cruel amusement.

"It's a simple choice, my dear. You either try to escape me by running through the light, which in your newborn state will burn you quite badly, if not kill you outright, or you wait for me. Which would be less painful, do you think?"

She crouched against the wall, the safety zone shrinking between her and the light that moved closer to her as the sun rose. She was quite certain that whatever punishment LaCroix intended would far outstrip that burning and last far longer. But she did not want to die.

Blood tears began to trickle down her face as she realized the trap he had laid for her. What would he do to her?

"Choose, Janette, for I weary of this childish game. Every action has specific consequences and you have earned your punishment."

She waited, eyes wide and terrified as he approached her, and cringed as he pulled her to her feet.

"This way, Janette. A tunnel that will take us back to our resting place."

She followed him unwillingly. His grip on her wrist was unyielding. When they finally reached the haven, he turned to light the candles. She stood in the center of the room, waiting with agonized tension for what was to follow. It would be very bad.

LaCroix reached for almost casually, tearing the neck of her gown to reveal her long white throat and his fangs tore into her. Never had she felt pain like this, not even from the sun, and what followed would never leave her memory. Throughout the long day, LaCroix showed her just how inventive someone could be in inflicting various degrees of emotional and physical pain. At the end she was curled up on his bed, tears and screams long spent. She was numb. LaCroix sat down next to her, his eyes curiously empty. He did not even look victorious at his subjugation of her. He looked as if he hadn't felt anything at all. The early fury had long since faded to be replaced by cold speculation. He rolled her unresisting body to him as he lay down beside her.

"I think, sweet Janette, that I now prefer more pleasurable pursuits."

His passion was icy and she hated him more for the pleasure he forced upon her than for his earlier infliction of pain. Ultimately, that was most degrading punishment of all.

Returning to the present, she caught LaCroix staring at her with his small smile, the one that froze her innards. He knew exactly what she had been thinking about. She turned away from him, her wine glass sloshing a bit in her trembling hand. Damn him for that. And damn him for what he was doing to that innocent child.

She waited until LaCroix left the club with Arielle in tow, then poured herself another glass of her best private stock. Gulping it down, she jerked from Miklos's concerned touch.

"Unkind memories, Janette?"

She forced herself to exhale and relax.

"Yes, Miklos. Unkind memories."

She closed her eyes and sat down on a corner stool, waiting for the time when she could escape to her apartment and curl up in the safety of her bed, away from prying, concerned gazes and from good intentions. *My own little hell, that I visit far too often. Ah, Nicola, where are you when I need you most?*

Nick got home early and laid down on his bed wearily. It had been a long shift, and abstaining from the blood had made him weaker than usual. He tired much more easily, and, disturbingly, he dreamed.

Of late, LaCroix's velvet seductive voice tormented him with taunts about his mortality, and Nicolas found himself back in the same place he had visited the last three days of sleep. He stood on a old stone bridge, shrouded in fog. On one end, there was Natalie reaching for him, her voice lost in the wind. On the other end, LaCroix stood impassively, holding onto a chain that bound Nicolas to the tower on LaCroix's side. Nick tugged at it and found that he could not budge the links that circled his neck.

LaCroix reached out casually and wrapped the chain around his hand and yanked Nicolas off his feet. Nicolas fell hard against the stone floor of the bridge and struggled to regain his footing. Another yank brought him back down to his knees, just like a dog being brought to heel. He struggled against the chain, but each time he tried to stand, he was brought down. Finally, exhausted, he lay spent. Natalie's voice was lost in the wind that blew around him, yet did not disturb the fog.

He waited, eyes closed, as footsteps approached him and stopped by his head. Waited for LaCroix to speak, to taunt him yet again, and inevitably, he woke, as he always did, bathed in blood sweat. Shuddering, he turned on the bedside light, and stared at the shadows in the room. LaCroix was coming for him. It was only a matter of time.

CHAPTER 3

Nick felt the sunset as he woke, and opened the blinds to view the fading red-gold horizon. He was exhausted. The dreams were draining his energy as surely as the abstinence from the blood. He wouldn't be able to work if this continued. He had also been disturbed by his connection to Janette. He had felt a wavering of the threads last night, as if someone had plucked discordant sounds on a stringed instrument. She was in turmoil about something, and for the normally unflappable Janette, that was significant.

He dressed quickly and made his way to his car and drove to the Raven in record time. Moving past the vampire and human clientele, he located her. She leaned against the bar in one of her daringly classic black gowns and Nick felt the old stirrings as he watched her. There would never be another to compare with her. She was unique.

"Hello, Janette," he said as he approached her, waiting for her usual smile and slightly acidic comments she usually favored him with. She gazed at him solemnly and greeted him in a quiet voice, her gaze returning to the swirling liquid in her wine glass. Nick was immediately alarmed and gazed worriedly around the club, for he could feel the faintest echo of some menacing presence.

"It's LaCroix, isn't it?" he asked. Janette tightened her lips and refused to look at him.

"What is it, Janette? Is it Arielle?"

Janette finally looked up at the handsome blonde vampire and reached out to touch his face lightly with her gloved hand.

"Ah, my Nicola. The knight errant bent to save the fair maiden. I could have used your chivalry then. Alas, I had no champion. Pity it won't help Arielle now."

"What are you talking about?" he asked in frustration, grabbing her hand and pulling her closer. She allowed the movement, and took another sip of wine.

"He was here with her last night. She's quite fragile, and quiet."

"She's all right, then?" he asked urgently.

"Not at all, Nicola. I don't think anyone in LaCroix's power can be said to be doing well. She exists."

"He's hurt her?"

Oh, yes, Nicola. Most assuredly he has, and in a way that you as a man would never truly understand. He controlled you, he beat you, terrorized you and seduced you to darkness, but he never did the things to you that a lover might have done. You will never know that particular hell, just as you would never have inflicted that hell on another.

"Janette?" he asked again anxiously. Janette turned to view his boyish face, his beautiful eyes, and sighed inwardly. She could no more change Nicola than she could herself, or their master.

"She appears frightened still, but I have a feeling she is too new at this life to understand. He is quite possessive of her, and one might say... indulgent."

Yes, one might say many things.

"I want to help her, Janette, but I can't. He's in my dreams now."

He sounded like a bewildered little boy. Janette reached out to pull his head against hers, and he buried his face in her hair. Poor Nicola, always tortured by human conscience and morality.

"He's coming after us, isn't he?" he asked gruffly, knowing she sensed the bond more strongly than he. "Why now, Janette? What is he planning?"

"Nicola, I cannot claim to know what LaCroix thinks, but surely you know that there is no use in defying him?"

"You don't really believe he has our best interests in mind, do you?"

"I suppose one must trust that at his age he would know best." The blatant untruth hung between them for countless seconds.

He turned his head away from her and leaned against the wall, pulling her against him as he cradled her. "I don't want him controlling me again. You know what it was like when he had us under his thumb. I can't do it, Janette. You know I can't be what he wants me to be. I could try to run, but he'd find me, or I could refuse, but LaCroix won't take no for an answer." Nick hesitated, then continued. "I even thought of walking out into the sun, but then my soul would remain damned. As long as I exist, I'll have a chance for redemption."

"Do you truly believe that, Nicola? Kill yourself, be damned by your God. Return to the night, be damned by your God. Try to escape, be hunted by LaCroix until you give in. Don't you see? You have no choice at all except to be what you are: a vampire. One of God's creatures, no more, no less. I never could understand why you would need to repent for being true to yourself."

"It's not the vampirism, Janette. It's the hundreds of mortals I have killed. For food, for sport, for sheer vindictiveness."

"The human does not seek redemption for slaughtering cattle, or fish or fowl. They eat and they survive, as we do. What makes mortals more significant than any other animal, other than the egocentric philosophy that they are the dominant race? We are the dominant race and no apologies are needed for our place in the ecological food chain."

"It's a moral issue, Janette. 'Thou shall not kill'. We are meant to turn away from the darkness and turn to the Light."

"Oh, Nicola. This argument always gets us nowhere."

"And if I willingly go back to him? What then, Janette? You think that he'll let me continue my quest? He'll undermine anything I try to do to regain mortality."

"You are still afraid that he will wreck vengeance on you."

"And you aren't, Janette?" Nick asked pointedly, his eyes daring her to deny it.

"Of course I am wary of him. Of his age, his power, his knowledge. But he did create us. He would not want us with him if he didn't value us."

"Are those your convictions, Janette, or are you merely quoting his little philosophical musings?"

Janette refused to answer. He thought of the burning light, and held her closer.

"What did he do to you, Janette?" Nick asked in a low voice.

Janette closed her eyes as she moved them from the wall and rocked him against her. For all the world they appeared to be moving to the slow beat of music thrumming through the club. This was the first time he had ever asked her, although he had hinted for answers before, only to be stopped by her beautiful frozen face. He had known instinctively that she had suffered just as much as he, maybe more.

"It's in the past, Nicola. A moment of rage, never to be repeated. He would never succumb to that loss of control again. I want to forget what happened. It does no good to dwell on it. *Just as it does no good to fight the inevitable. We struggle out of principle, but we both know what the outcome will be.*

"What are we going to do, Janette? What will I do?"

"I don't know, Nicola. I don't know."

Janette laid her head against him, suddenly weary in a way that made her want to draw from whatever strength he had, whatever love they had shared, and whatever brightness and goodness flowed through his troubled being. She wanted his light now, to banish the shadows.

Nicola, my golden knight. They danced on.

Chapter 4

"Dress for the weather, Arielle. We hunt tonight."

Arielle stood frozen in the middle of the bedroom, her hand pausing in the act of brushing her long black hair. LaCroix stood before her in his dressing gown. It was a casual pose, taking their proximity for granted. Their intimacy went beyond any human relationship, a vampire bond that would ultimately give more than pleasure or passion. The only things she knew she had learned from LaCroix, who had two millennia of experience to draw on. The things he said and did to her shamed and enthralled her. He read her

thoughts, divined every mood from her face, stirred her passions and exulted in her fears. No wonder Nicolas and Janette feared him so.

Yet her worst fears were still to come: he expected her to kill. Numbly she gathered her clothes and went into the bathroom to dress. How could he expect her to take another life after all that had happened to her?

Far too soon Arielle stood with LaCroix on the rooftop overlooking an alley. The transient below was hardly choice pickings for the master vampire, but more than adequate for a young one's first kill.

"He's the one, Arielle. Take his blood. Learn the taste of humanity."

Arielle was nearly shaking with hunger. The all-consuming thirst blinded her to the immorality of killing, but she shook her head violently.

LaCroix gripped her hair and nearly snapped her neck in his anger.

"You will obey me!" he gritted out in dark tones.

She shook her head slightly against the pressure twisting her neck, not knowing where she drew the strength to resist him.

"No!" she choked, only to have him lift her bodily and shake her.

"You will do as I say!" he rumbled, but she pinched her lips and closed her eyes in negation. With that, the master vampire levitated into the sky, holding her like a hawk does a mouse. She dangled from his hands and knew that his wrath was far from over. He took them back to his house, nearly throwing her inside the door. She stood before him, cowed by his blazing eyes and fangs.

He tore off the coat she wore and exposed her neck. This would be the terrible pain she remembered. She cried silently as she waited for the inevitable. He hesitated as the rage dwindled. He stopped and let her pull away from him. She stumbled to the couch and curled up in a tiny ball of misery, her arms wrapped around her head in a vain attempt to defend herself.

This was not what he wanted. His temper had been well controlled for many years, barring the odd confrontation. She had disobeyed him but surely there were better methods to discipline her. The disturbing images of Nicolas, crying and broken, and Janette, numb and blind, came back to him. Victims of the same anger he had been about to inflict on this fledgling vampire. He clenched and unclenched his fists, and willed himself to calmness. This trend toward self-analysis had been bothering him of late. He was what he was. No apologies or exceptions. He crossed the living room and opened the patio door to look out into the night. He didn't regret his power, his control, his existence, but he did curse the perfect memory vampirism gave him. Old wounds and hurts remained, never to be dulled by mortal forgetfulness.

"Lucius!"

His father's angry voice echoed in the hallway, bouncing off the walls and the large clay urn the eight year child hid behind. He had not meant to break his father's prized statue. The former Roman general had many laurels to rest upon. He was a model citizen, a revered leader and influential public figure. His battles were the victories of legends. And in private, he was a brutal tyrant.

Lucius cowered behind the urn, crouched against the wall as he tried to muffle his frightened sobs with his fist. His father would find him and beat him, as he had so many times before.

"Valerius, no!" This from his mother, the gentle, loving woman who sang him to sleep and chased away what monsters she could, save the one that lived with them. They were both victims of the vindictive, bitter man who hid behind the hero's mask.

Lucius heard his father's footsteps approaching and squeezed his eyes shut in the vain hope that if he couldn't see his father, his father wouldn't see him. The bellowing voice grew closer, and in his mind's eye, Lucius could picture the angry features flushed with rage and wine.

"Worthless dog! I'll teach you!" Lucius was hauled roughly from his hiding place, twisting in vain against the powerful grip as the stick fell against his back, his buttocks and legs. It strafed his face as he tried to escape, and with outrage, his father threw him against the urn. It shattered, cutting a deep crescent in the boy's forehead. The scar would remain to remind Lucius of his past. It in no way matched the scar that had been left on his heart.

His mother gathered him to her, weeping as she patted ineffectually against the bleeding wounds, keening as she rocked him. No matter her inability to protect her only child, she loved him. Lucius burrowed further into her embrace, as the first seeds of vengeance were sown. I'll make you pay, father. One day, you will pay for this.

He forced himself out of his maudlin introspection. He watched the weeping young vampire curled on his couch, unable to comfort her.

Your doing, Fleur. I know you watch me. You're the one who's forcing me to look at my life, such as it is.

He turned to walk back to the couch and picked up Arielle, ignoring her tearful, frantic protests. He sat down and cradled her, his face resting on her hair.

I'm sorry, Fleur.

Arielle cried herself to sleep, and LaCroix stayed motionless. For once he faced his inner demons with loathing. Later, he stood up and carried Arielle to the bed and laid down beside her. In time, he would fall asleep. Until then, his memories would burn him.

Arielle stood on the bridge. The fog was still heavy, and all sound was muted. Nick was behind her, moving toward the tall figure waiting on the opposite side. She felt the beckoning, drawn toward the master vampire like a siren. She tried to fight it as Nicolas drew abreast of her, then passed her, and she realized with horror that he was bound by a chain that LaCroix was patiently reeling in. She shut her eyes and tried to fight the call. LaCroix's eyes narrowed and his lips tightened as he pulled a half-protesting Nick along, but unable to get Arielle to follow his bidding. Then a bolt of fire seemed to shoot from him, engulfing her, burning her alive as she watched LaCroix shatter into a thousand pieces, blowing away in a non-existent wind as she felt the agony of the blaze charring her for endless moments before she ceased to be.

Arielle woke with a start, her skin stinging as if millions of needles were poked into her. The sensation faded with the last of the dream, and she wiped the blood sweat from her forehead. She didn't remember anything after falling asleep in LaCroix's arms, after he had almost mutilated her in his rage. He had left, and she had slept through the day. No telling when he might return.

If I was brave, I'd run from him. I'd hide and try to escape. But I'm not brave. Terrified as she was of him, she still felt drawn to the well of sorrow inside him. Something in him hurt him just as badly as anything she had endured. Broken people. Held together with a little glue, some string and wire. Missing bits and pieces. His pain made him a kindred spirit, someone who knew what she had endured, understood every aspect even though he seemed bent on repeating the cycle with her.

I need to know what happened to Nick and Janette. What I can do to help myself, help him. She got up and dressed, then picked up the cordless phone. She wondered how she would find Nick's number, then saw the neatly labeled speed dial numbers. LaCroix was nothing if not organized. She dialed Nick's number first, but all she reached was his answering machine. She hung up without leaving a message. He was no doubt working. Then she dialed the Raven, timidly requesting to speak to Janette as an unfamiliar, gruff male voice answered the phone.

Arielle waited for quite a while until she heard the familiar feminine voice.

"Janette, this is Arielle."

"Arielle! What is wrong, my dear?"

The warmth in Janette's lightly accented tones made Arielle's throat tighten.

"I, uh, I need to talk to you. Is there any way you could come here?"

"LaCroix, he is out?" That question seemed of monumental importance.

"Yes."

"I shall be there shortly." With that Janette hung up the phone. No questions or demands. Within minutes, Janette walked through the front door. She saw Arielle's pale figure hunched in LaCroix's leather chair and immediately walked over to her. Janette grasped Arielle's face with both hands, distressed at the look in the young vampire's eyes.

"Ah, cherie, what did he do to you?"

Arielle swallowed a few times, then related the past night's events. Janette sat next to Arielle, allowing her pour out how she had refused to kill, LaCroix's near retribution and the distressing dreams she had been having.

Janette listened for a time, then said gently, "There is more, no?"

It was all the impetus Arielle needed. What came out now was a young girl's fears and insecurities, and a mortal's bewilderment at the strange and exotic passions of the night. A mortal who had never known mortal love, now overwhelmed by a supernatural lover. Janette remembered her own mortal days and reached out to rock Arielle, hurting for her, somehow strangely jealous of her and ashamed to the bone for that latter feeling.

"It's never easy, my dear. This darkness brings more things than any of us bargained for in the beginning. More passion, more intensity, more pain."

"I don't know what to do. I can't kill. I can't please him. I'm scared that he'll kill me if I don't obey."

"Which are you more frightened of, cherie, his anger or his...love?" The last word was said with some hesitation, as if Janette searched for the proper euphemism for LaCroix's affections.

Arielle grimaced, embarrassed by her confession, and looked away.

"When one is brought across, it's a very private and intimate thing. With LaCroix, it's more than that. He...takes. Completely," Janette said softly. He did more than take. He obliterated anything, past or present. Nothing existed before or after crossing over.

"It's the price you pay for eternity, cherie. There is always someone who exacts the toll for immortality."

"I can't be what he wants, Janette. He loved somebody else long ago. He still loves her. There's no room for anyone else." *There's no room for me.*

Janette drew in her breath sharply. So the child had guessed that. What else might she have sensed? There was no point in prevaricating. "Fleur."

"Who was she, Janette?"

"A mortal, like all of us were at one time. A girl who had more dreams and expectations than LaCroix could fulfil, and an innocent heart that Nicola would not let him corrupt. LaCroix loved her enough to give her up."

"Nick knew her?"

"She was Nicola's sister." Arielle became very quiet. It made sense, in some strange way. The kinship she had felt for Nick, the disturbing flashes of almost memory.

"So why did he come after me? Does he think I'm ...her?"

"You wear the chain she gave her baby."

"Fleur had a baby?"

"It's a long story, my dear. Nicola made Fleur forget her love for LaCroix and he thought all would be well. But she did remember and ran away. She had an affair with a soldier who looked very much like LaCroix and became pregnant. She died during childbirth. We found her shortly afterward, but the baby had been sold. LaCroix vowed he would find her, or her ancestors. He has been searching for centuries, until he found you."

"But I'm **not** Fleur!"

"Are you certain, cherie? Maybe we all are just an extension of someone else's life. Humans die and are reborn, so their souls continue in their own type of immortality. They just change form."

"I don't know if I can believe that, Janette."

"But it is obvious that LaCroix does. He has been searching for Fleur for eight hundred years and now he is convinced he has found her in you. That is why he made you what you are now, and why he guards you with such jealousy and anger. He doesn't wish to lose you."

"He doesn't love me," Arielle stated bleakly.

"I don't know if he can, Arielle. Whatever love he had for Fleur died along with her."

Janette sighed inwardly as she thought of LaCroix's inner demons. '*In vigilance of grief that would compel, the soul to hate for having loved too well.*' Byron knew LaCroix better than he thought.

"He loves you and Nick, doesn't he? He brought you across, so he must have loved you."

Janette's lips curved slightly, but her eyes were not smiling. "I wouldn't call that love, cherie."

"What do I do, Janette?" Arielle asked in bewilderment. "Please, tell me what to do!"

Janette moved so that she could face the young vampire, maternally smoothing back the long strands of hair from Arielle's small face. "You have two choices, cherie. You can accede to his wishes as best you can, in the hope that he will grow to care for you, or you can walk out into the sun and end it all. There is no middle ground here."

Arielle nodded mutely. She was truly alone in her decision. Biting her lip she placed her face in her hands, heaving a few deep breaths as she tried to regain control of her emotions. Janette stroked her back comfortingly. They stayed that way for a long time, then Arielle looked up with a calm composure that Janette had to admire.

"Thank you, Janette," she said softly. "I'll think about what you said."

"I hope you find peace in this existence, Arielle. One way or the other."

With that Janette left the young vampire staring blindly at the decorative mantelpiece that rivaled Nicolas's. LaCroix found her sitting in that position several hours later. When she didn't respond to his voice, he walked to her and picked up her unresisting body and carried her to bed. His thoughts drifted back without conscious effort.

Lucius walked through the house, exceedingly glad that his father was nowhere to be seen. He was a tall, lanky boy at twelve, although his father still dwarfed him. And still beat him, though not as often of late. The sound of soft crying carried to him, and he stopped at the closed door from behind which the sounds were coming from. Opening the door slightly, he stared with horror and sick fascination as he watched his father have his way with one of the female slaves. The young pretty one who always had a smile and a fresh pastry for him.

She fought wildly against the man but was unable to stop the rape. Unable to stop the fist that smashed against her jaw or that brutally pawed her. Unable to stop the tears that streamed down her face as she surrendered to the inevitable. Then Valerius looked up to see his son watching him from the doorway and smirked.

"Remember this, Lucius. Women are for a man's comfort and nothing more." Valerius laughed as his son ran off, the unmistakable sound of retching following the sound of the boy's footsteps. Lucius finished heaving and sat up shakily from where he had crouched outside the courtyard door. His mother gently smoothed the hair back from his brow. She knew what he had seen.

"You don't ever have to be like that, Lucius. Remember that. You don't ever want to be what he is."

Lucius clung to her and prayed to the gods to deliver them from the madman in their house.

He returned to the young vampire he held in his arms. Laying close to her, he felt the prickling fear that he had pushed her too far. He heaved a sigh of relief when she slowly drifted into slumber and unconsciously moved closer to him. *I will have to be much more careful in the future.*

Chapter 5

Nick lay on the cold stone bridge. LaCroix stood at his head, his very silence menacing. Nick was exhausted, unable to stop LaCroix when the elder reached down and pulled him to his feet. LaCroix wrapped him in an unbreakable embrace, the possessive touch frightening him. But what frightened Nick even more was his response to it. He leaned into LaCroix, felt the paternal protection surrounding him and gladly shut his eyes. He was safe. He willingly surrendered to the darkness.

Nick woke, bathed in blood sweat. It was slowly but surely eroding his conviction in what he wanted to do. He wanted mortality, yearned for it with the zealousness of the newly converted, but LaCroix's voice and image constantly shadowed him and casted doubt on his convictions and beliefs. He could feel himself backsliding. And there was nothing he could do to stop it. He dressed mechanically, stumbling to the refrigerator and pulling out a bottle, then cursing as he put it back. Natalie's frowning countenance in his head stopped him.

He stopped by the coroner's office on his way to work and caught Nat in the middle of an autopsy. She turned to smile at him then frowned at his tense features.

"What is it, Nick?"

He sat down at her desk, idly shuffling through her charts and papers as he searched for words. Finally he looked up at her concerned face. "It's starting, Nat" he said quietly.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, although her stomach was clenching a bit at the distracted, hunted expression he wore. For the last few months since Arielle's 'death', she had thought they were safe.

"He's in my dreams, Nat" he said in tight tones.

Although Natalie couldn't understand the significance of this, she felt his tension. "Who, Nick?"

"LaCroix. He's started to call Janette and me back to him. I feel him watching me. He taunts me on his radio show."

"But he's always done that, Nick. What so different now? I thought he has Arielle to keep him occupied now."

"Yes, he has Arielle, but he wants me back. He's always made that clear. I thought it would be a long time before he came after me, but he's closer now than ever."

"How do you know that, Nick?" Natalie asked in frustration.

"His voice isn't just on the radio. I hear him in my head in my sleep. He's reminding me of when I was brought across, and all the things I felt. He wants me back."

Arielle nodded mutely. She was truly alone in her decision. Biting her lip she placed her face in her hands, heaving a few deep breaths as she tried to regain control of her emotions. Janette stroked her back comfortingly. They stayed that way for a long time, then Arielle looked up with a calm composure that Janette had to admire.

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"I hope you find peace in this existence, Arielle. One way or the other."

With that Janette left the young vampire staring blindly at the decorative mantelpiece that rivaled Nicolas's. LaCroix found her sitting in that position several hours later. When she didn't respond to his voice, he walked to her and picked up her unresisting body and carried her to bed. His thoughts drifted back without conscious effort.

Lucius walked through the house, exceedingly glad that his father was nowhere to be seen. He was a tall, lanky boy at twelve, although his father still dwarfed him. And still beat him, though not as often of late. The sound of soft crying carried to him, and he stopped at the closed door from behind which the sounds were coming from. Opening the door slightly, he stared with horror and sick fascination as he watched his father have his way with one of the female slaves. The young pretty one who always had a smile and a fresh pastry for him.

She fought wildly against the man but was unable to stop the rape. Unable to stop the fist that smashed against her jaw or that brutally pawed her. Unable to stop the tears that streamed down her face as she surrendered to the inevitable. Then Valerius looked up to see his son watching him from the doorway and smirked.

"Remember this, Lucius. Women are for a man's comfort and nothing more." Valerius laughed as his son ran off, the unmistakable sound of retching following the sound of the boy's footsteps. Lucius finished heaving and sat up shakily from where he had crouched outside the courtyard door. His mother gently smoothed the hair back from his brow. She knew what he had seen.

"You don't ever have to be like that, Lucius. Remember that. You don't ever want to be what he is."

Lucius clung to her and prayed to the gods to deliver them from the madman in their house.

He returned to the young vampire he held in his arms. Laying close to her, he felt the prickling fear that he had pushed her too far. He heaved a sigh of relief when she slowly drifted into slumber and unconsciously moved closer to him. *I will have to be much more careful in the future.*

Chapter 5

Nick lay on the cold stone bridge. LaCroix stood at his head, his very silence menacing. Nick was exhausted, unable to stop LaCroix when the elder reached down and pulled him to his feet. LaCroix wrapped him in an unbreakable embrace, the possessive touch frightening him. But what frightened Nick even more was his response to it. He leaned into LaCroix, felt the paternal protection surrounding him and gladly shut his eyes. He was safe. He willingly surrendered to the darkness.

Nick woke, bathed in blood sweat. It was slowly but surely eroding his conviction in what he wanted to do. He wanted mortality, yearned for it with the zealousness of the newly converted, but LaCroix's voice and image constantly shadowed him and casted doubt on his convictions and beliefs. He could feel himself backsliding. And there was nothing he could do to stop it. He dressed mechanically, stumbling to the refrigerator and pulling out a bottle, then cursing as he put it back. Natalie's frowning countenance in his head stopped him.

He stopped by the coroner's office on his way to work and caught Nat in the middle of an autopsy. She turned to smile at him then frowned at his tense features.

"What is it, Nick?"

He sat down at her desk, idly shuffling through her charts and papers as he searched for words. Finally he looked up at her concerned face. "It's starting, Nat" he said quietly.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, although her stomach was clenching a bit at the distracted, hunted expression he wore. For the last few months since Arielle's 'death', she had thought they were safe.

"He's in my dreams, Nat" he said in tight tones.

Although Natalie couldn't understand the significance of this, she felt his tension. "Who, Nick?"

"LaCroix. He's started to call Janette and me back to him. I feel him watching me. He taunts me on his radio show."

"But he's always done that, Nick. What so different now? I thought he has Arielle to keep him occupied now."

"Yes, he has Arielle, but he wants me back. He's always made that clear. I thought it would be a long time before he came after me, but he's closer now than ever."

"How do you know that, Nick?" Natalie asked in frustration.

"His voice isn't just on the radio. I hear him in my head in my sleep. He's reminding me of when I was brought across, and all the things I felt. He wants me back."

"To control you and intimidate you," Nat retorted with barely suppressed anger. "I thought we talked about that. About how he abused you. You don't want to ever let him do that to you again!"

"I don't have a choice in this, Nat, if he truly wants me back."

"There is always a choice, Nick! Even if it means ending your own existence!"

Nick thought about that, and then looked up at Natalie's flushed features with great sadness. "I hope it won't come to that, Nat. I hope he won't push me to walk out into the sun."

"You mean you'd just go with him?" Stripping off her soiled gloves, Natalie reached out and grabbed his jacket lapels and shook him. "Nick! Listen to yourself! You're talking about giving in to a man who abused you and betrayed you. Do you really want that? Aren't you going to fight for yourself? For us?"

Nick closed his eyes, concentrating on that faint vibration he felt close to him. LaCroix was nearby, even now. How easy it would be to let go and surrender to the darkness again. Let it consume him. He was so tired.

Natalie stared at his pale face. There was more than physical exhaustion here. He seemed...depressed. What do you do with a vampire in a deep blue funk? Natalie ran her hand through her hair in frustration. Maybe she shouldn't have insisted on his avoiding the blood. It had weakened him physically, and now even his mental defenses were crumbling.

"All right, Nick. Maybe he is coming after you, but you don't have to fight this alone. Maybe Janette can help you. I'll do what I can as well."

Nick opened his eyes and his expression shocked her. He was almost to the point of tears. She had never, ever seen him cry. Not even when LaCroix had taken Arielle away.

"Maybe I don't want to fight anymore, Nat. Perhaps this was meant to be. LaCroix always said I'd come back to him. Perhaps it's time."

"No! A thousand times, no! You can't let him do this to you! What about us? What about Schanke, and Captain Cohen, and all the others who need you?"

He rubbed his eyes tiredly. "I have to go, Nat. I'll talk to you later."

"Wait! Don't leave! What about what you were saying?"

"I think it's just my being so tired. It'll get better. I'll sleep today. Maybe some blood will give me back my energy."

It would take more than that, and Natalie watched with terrified frustration as he walked out the door. He was ripe for a fall. LaCroix couldn't have orchestrated this better if he had tried. She would have to keep a very close eye on him.

Nick called in sick, unbeknownst to her and after he parked the caddy, he flew to the park where LaCroix had met Arielle so long ago. There

was no one in sight, but he knew LaCroix couldn't be far. There, he felt the stirring. He opened his eyes to see LaCroix walk toward him.

"Janette says you're coming after us," Nick stated without preamble.

"Did she? Well, she is most astute about our connection. I suppose she must be right."

"Why, LaCroix? Why now? You have Arielle. Isn't that enough?"

"No, Nicolas. It will never be enough until I have all of you back with me, and I have decided that the time is now."

"I'll fight you, LaCroix," Nick said determinedly, but he was so exhausted that he stumbled as he tried to step back away from the elder vampire. LaCroix reached out easily to catch him and settle him back on his feet.

"Feeling a little tired, Nicolas? You know you must feed to stay strong. You can't fight in this condition."

Memories of their warehouse confrontation came back to Nick. LaCroix had said something similar then, and then they had fought. Nick wasn't up to that type of violent encounter, and in truth, didn't even want to start one. He sat heavily on a park bench and rubbed his eyes.

"Would it be so bad, Nicolas? To let yourself go and return to what you were meant to be? Wouldn't you like to rest peacefully, without these dreams?"

"Did you do this to me, LaCroix?" he asked wearily.

"I can't make dreams, Nicolas. You make them, just as you create your own demons. I know you are troubled. I feel your turmoil. It's all so unnecessary. Just come back, and I'll take care of everything."

Yes. Come back to the master vampire and allow himself to be controlled, chained forever at his side. Eternally under the master's protection and subject to his whims and angers. Nick remembered the burning light and shuddered. How could he even contemplate returning to this creature?

"It won't be like that, Nicolas. You needn't fear that type of punishment from me again. With a little cooperation, I think you'll find me a most benevolent father."

The voice was lulled him again. It would be far too easy to let go and allow LaCroix to take him over. It would be so nice to be able to sleep dreamlessly again, not to start at shadows and nurture the horrible gnawing fear that the master vampire lay in wait for him. To let his father take care of him, just as he had in the beginning.

"I'm so tired," Nick murmured. He leaned against the back of the bench. LaCroix moved to lay a hand on his shoulder and Nick didn't protest. He was beyond arguing. The little surge of temper had drained him completely. LaCroix moved to place his other hand on Nicolas's head, and

Nick could feel the quiet power that hummed through the master vampire. It energized him even as it lulled him into complacency. He stifled the urge to lay his head back against LaCroix and sleep. The master vampire's touch was possessive yet somehow comforting. *Why couldn't you been this way with me before, LaCroix? If you had, I might have stayed with you. Now I'll never know for sure.*

"You're exhausted, Nicolas. I think I'll take you back home to get some rest. You're hardly in form for one of our sparring matches."

LaCroix was worried about his state of mind? It hardly seemed possible. Nick opened his eyes to gaze suspiciously at the elder, but LaCroix only lifted his hand from Nick's head to help him up from the bench.

"Why are you doing this, LaCroix?" he asked.

"Believe it or not, Nicolas, I do have your best interests at heart. You may not like my methods, but they do bring results."

Nick tried to keep up with the conversation, but his sluggish mind wasn't allowing him to match wits and cunning with LaCroix, who no doubt had another hidden agenda.

"Come, Nicolas. I will take you home."

"No!" Nick grunted stubbornly, instinctively rejecting anything LaCroix wanted to do. Nick didn't want to be trapped again.

"Come along, Nicolas," LaCroix cajoled him in a calm voice. "You're physically and mentally drained. You can't fight me. You and I both know it."

Nick stared resentfully at his creator. Part of him petulantly denied any need for help, like a stubborn little boy, and part of him was terrified of giving in. Before he could give voice to his objections, LaCroix had plucked him from the ground and flew with him into the night sky. Nick struggled feebly against his master as he lay suspended over LaCroix's shoulder, but eventually he stopped, unable to budge the arm that held him immobile. Upside down, he watched the city below them as LaCroix flew to the loft. It was a novelty to be treated like he had no more strength than any ordinary mortal. LaCroix entered the loft through the skylight, and then surprisingly gently deposited Nick on his black leather couch.

Nick smoothed his ruffled hair and said almost sulkily. "I could have flown by myself!"

LaCroix sat down in the armchair and watched him with amused eyes. "Certainly, Nicolas, and probably flown right into the CN tower on your way. In you I see a human child stubbornly insisting that he is not tired and screaming until he falls over in exhaustion."

Nick was close to anger at being treated like a toddler, but he just didn't feel up to expending the emotion. He stretched out on the couch and scrunched the pillow under his head until it conformed exactly to the curve of his neck. He could feel his eyelids drooping.

"Don't think you've won anything by doing this, LaCroix."

"Won? My dear Nicolas, this is not a contest. There are no sides. There is one plotted course for your destiny, and I am here to guide you along it. You have no choice in this. I merely indulge you now because you must be fit to confront your fears and uncertainties about your existence."

Nick opened his mouth to protest, but LaCroix continued.

"You've tried to convince yourself that the vampire is some evil abomination that you will conquer with moral righteousness. You're not fighting some dark outside force, but something that has always been part of you. The quality that allowed you to be brought across in the first place. I know you're frightened, Nicolas, but the true fact of the matter is, the one whom you fear the most is not me, but yourself."

Nick opened his eyes half-way. He wanted to vehemently protest that piece of deductive reasoning. LaCroix had always seen too much, especially the many conflicting emotions that buffeted his son. Nick gazed with puzzlement at LaCroix.

"Why are being nice to me?" he asked.

LaCroix smiled enigmatically at him.

"You're my son, Nicolas. Despite the misunderstandings we have had, and my regrettable moments of anger, I do care for you."

Nicolas didn't trust him, that much was obvious as he watched the expression of disbelief on his son's face. No matter. There would be plenty of time to build their relationship back to a level of complete trust. But first, he had to gather his wayward child back into the fold. Outright force had chased his son away. Softer tactics had drawn him closer, but not close enough. Now it was time to firmly rein the boy in.

LaCroix laid his hand on Nick's forehead, his touch soothing and lulling the younger vampire. "Sleep, Nicolas, without nightmares. When you wake, you will be rested and calm."

Nick didn't think he was that susceptible to LaCroix's hypnotic suggestions, but perhaps his mental fatigue made him more vulnerable, for he found the quiet command to be most effective. The insane picture of LaCroix humming a lullaby crossed his mind as he yielded to the mental suggestion. *It's all right. Daddy's singing me to sleep.*

Nick closed his eyes and let sleep overtake him. LaCroix watched his child for several more minutes, then unfolded a blanket and draped it over Nicolas's sleeping form. A totally human gesture, yet one that LaCroix found satisfying.

I would do so much for you, Nicolas, if only you would allow me to.

He left the loft shortly afterward. Nicolas slept peacefully without dreams.

Janette was in her office, looking over the books and sipping from her favorite wine glass. Profits were most acceptable this quarter, and she had in mind to do some redecorating, not to mention refreshing her wardrobe. She was restless, however, and whenever she reached out to seek Nicolas, she felt his pain, confusion and fatigue. It worried her. Arielle, too, was a source of concern. Yet each time she saw the younger vampire, Janette felt the pangs of jealousy when she thought of how much Nicola cared for Arielle, and how possessive LaCroix was of his protégé.

I shouldn't envy the child when she no doubt suffers as much as I did under his domination. But he never cared for me as much as he does her, or Nicola. LaCroix would have left me to the hunters, to be destroyed, but Nicola saved me. So where is Nicola now? He is trying to rejoin mortality with his little coroner friend. Even he will leave me. Then I will be alone.

Janette emerged from her introspection abruptly to focus again on the books. It did no good to dwell on things she couldn't change. A tingle in her spine alerted her to a presence. Looking up quickly, she saw LaCroix leaning on the door frame, watching her.

"Good evening, Janette. May I come in?"

He made it sound so polite, when she knew well and good it was not a request. She nodded stiffly and LaCroix walked over to her, and bent down to brush her nape with a gentle kiss. She was unable to suppress a shiver and couldn't say if it was dread or delight.

"What do you want, LaCroix?" she asked pointedly, trying valiantly to ignore the strange pleasure she felt at being the center of his attention while he wasn't actively trying to intimidate her. He wanted something, otherwise he wouldn't be playing these games.

"Merely to talk. We haven't one of our heart-to-heart chats in at least two decades."

She almost stood up, then thought better of it. No sense in giving him any more advantage over her.

"Suspicious as always, my dear. I would have thought we knew each other better by now."

Her face went into its porcelain mask, freezing all expression. Yes, she knew him quite well. Too well.

"I repeat, what do you want?"

LaCroix leaned against the edge of her desk, braced on one hip. He reached over and plucked the pen she was twisting restlessly in her fingers from her hand and laid it on the desk. She stiffened, waiting for whatever came next. His hand reached out to trace her face lightly, then lingered on the curve of her neck. She shuddered again.

"We need to talk, Janette. About Nicolas, about Arielle, and about you. All my children."

She felt a cool shadow over the bed, lulling her, and the soft music of a rebec soothing her to sleep. She did not dream.

Chapter 6

Arielle woke from her troubled slumber and sat up with a start. She had dreamt of the bridge again, and this time she had walked toward LaCroix, and realized that Nick was following her. Janette stood waiting on the other side for them. She wiped her brow with a trembling hand. She knew instinctively that Nick had dreamt the same. *What kind of madness was this?*

Arielle was alone in the massive bed, and it felt odd. She had grown almost used to feeling the comfort of his body curled around hers. She got up, showered and dressed. LaCroix was out and had uncharacteristically left her alone. She walked through the empty house, missing his presence. However frightening it was to be around him, it was at least familiar. She walked into the library and glanced briefly at the shelved leather bound first edition books on very imaginable topic. She sat down in front of the highly sophisticated computer system that rested on the desk. The leather chair LaCroix used was massive, yet stylish. She curled up into it. It smelled like his cologne, and she closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation of being close to him without the complication of his physical presence.

She gathered up her courage and walked into the conservatory, with grand piano, shelves and shelves of music, a stereo with a large collection of compact disks and records, and a rebec lovingly packed into a wooden case. She felt the vibrations here. The talent that would be forever limited by vampirism. To be stopped just short of perfection because of a biological, metaphysical condition must be heart-breaking for the master vampire.

Guided by some unknown inner voice, she pulled the folder marked Vivaldi and selected the *Stabat Mater*. Sitting at the piano, she tentatively played some of the melody. Humming, she learned the notes, unaware that LaCroix had returned and watched her from the doorway, bleakness in his eyes. Then she sensed him. Looking up, she nearly stumbled as she scrambled to get up. He held up a hand to stop her.

"I wondered how long it would take until you came here."

With those simple words, LaCroix had given her both permission and encouragement. He sat down at the piano, while Arielle stood behind him, reading the notes as she hummed the melody.

"Sing, Arielle. Sing the words."

She lightly touched the keyboard to find her entrance note, and took a deep breath. She still had perfect pitch, and her voice rang as true as it had as a mortal, as if she had never lost the soul that made the difference.

Stabat mater dolorosa
Juxta crucem lacrimosa
Dum pendebat Filius
Cuius animam gementem
Contristatam et dolentem
Pertransivit gladius

LaCroix flinched slightly, and she stopped in mid phrase when he turned to look at her. A flash of such deep and naked pain showed in his eyes that she caught her breath.

"Do you know what the words mean, Arielle?"

"Some. It's about Jesus and Mary at the cross."

"Yes, it's about that fascinating little religion of Nicolas's, but even more, it's about a mother and her son."

"I didn't think you'd have anything to do with, well, you know, God."

"Just because I don't believe in religion doesn't mean I cannot appreciate the art and music, the poetry and literature that those faiths inspire. You don't have to believe to value it."

"What does it mean?" she asked quietly, sensing the disquiet in the vampire. He paused, then translated the Latin with the ease of long familiarity.

*In her sorrow stood the Mother
By the cross of Jesus weeping sorely
As he hung there, her dying son.
For her grief and lamentation
And the torment of her anguish
Was a sword to pierce her soul.*

LaCroix didn't notice how his gaze went backward into time.

"Did she love you?" Arielle asked in a small voice, "Did your mother love you like that?"

LaCroix's voice was hushed. "She was everything to me. She died trying to protect me."

"Valerius!" came the broken cry, and young Lucius woke from his troubled sleep. His mother screamed again, and Lucius rose and ran to his parents bedchamber. His father was beating his wife, wine-filled rage causing him to strike her again and again. Lucius ran to his father, trying to pull him away. Valerius turned on his son with fury, striking the boy over and over. Lucius felt his ribs crack, his wrist being twisted until it snapped.

"Valerius, leave him be!" With that his mother positioned herself around her son, attempting to shield him from the blows. Angrier, Valerius grabbed his wife and threw her against the wall. Her head snapped forward, and she fell bonelessly to the floor. Her eyes were open but sightless. There was no pulse fluttering her neck, no breath moving her chest.

Valerius mumbled incoherently as he stared at the still body. Lucius crawled to her, his trembling hand tracing her now serene features.

"Mama, wake up. Mama. Please."

Lucius did not know how long he sat stroking her face, pleading with her to speak, to wake. Valerius stumbled out to get another drink. Lucius sat with her for a long, long time, then finally he rose. He left his mother and went to his room. Picking up the knife he kept hidden under his pallet, he moved quietly down the hall until he reached the chamber where his father had now drunk himself into a stupor. Lucius stood with the knife clenched in his fist, anger and sorrow raging in him. Would his mother hate him for what he was about to do? Would she look at him with the terrible sorrow and pain she carried deep inside her?

'I'm sorry, Mama," he whispered as he approached the sleeping figure.

LaCroix's cold, mocking facade and incredible self-control were absent. Arielle reached out impulsively to touch his hand.

"I'm sorry, Lucien."

It was the first time that Arielle had used his given name since he had brought her across. LaCroix closed his eyes, then his face became inscrutable. It was almost as if she had imagined his momentary vulnerability. He pulled out some other music as he carefully refiled the Vivaldi.

"I'm not in the mood to continue this piece. Let us focus on Beethoven instead."

Arielle watched him with frustration. She had almost shared something with him, and then he had skillfully moved her away from him. No one dare look into his heart. LaCroix played a skilled accompaniment for her singing, but the notes on the page became pictures of his mother, who had tried to champion him against his father's rages. But Arielle had no one to protect her from himself. And neither had Janette or Nicolas.

I have become my father. I am my father's spirit, doomed....

With that the notes came to a crashing halt as he stood up and flung himself back from the piano. His eyes flashed red-gold and he snarled through his fangs. Arielle cowered back against the wall, not understanding why he was so angry, or what she had done to upset him so. He stormed out the door, and left her alone in the conservatory. She stood and picked up the scattered music sheets and carefully sorted and stacked them. Then she sat

down in the middle of the hardwood floor and looked through the compact discs until she found what she was looking for. Vivaldi's *Stabat Mater* came through in a clear male alto voice, and she curled up on her side on the oriental rug as she listened to the sorrowful sound of another mother's love.

CHAPTER 7

Nick woke from his slumber to find himself alone. The last thing he remembered

was LaCroix bringing him back to his apartment and pontificating. He hadn't slept so well in a long, long time. *LaCroix has his uses, even for vampire insomnia*, Nick thought with perverse humor.

He rose and went upstairs to shower and change. He headed for the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle, then frowned at the unfamiliar label. Who had put it in his refrigerator? He opened the bottle and sniffed the contents, and his eyes took on a golden glow. It was human blood. LaCroix must have left it for him. Nat's warning voice echoed in his head, but he tipped up the bottle and drank in several long gulps, shuddering in his pleasure. There was nothing like it. No cow would ever replace it. Refreshed and feeling quite guilty, he hurried out the door and headed for his car.

His shift was unspectacularly normal. A few interviews with people about an unsolved case, lots of paperwork, and Schanke.

"Nick!"

Nick looked up to see his partner hauling what looked like ten thousand manila file folders.

"I could use a little help, Knight."

"Sure, Schank." With that Nick scooped up the bundle from his partner's arms and set it on Schanke's desk. Schanke gave a long-suffering sigh and sat down to stare at the enormous pile of paper.

"How come I get stuck with all this paperwork? Geez, you woulda thought I had been derelict of duty instead of a few minutes late for a few shifts. Cohen hates me!"

"I thought we had cured you of your paranoia, Schank" Nick said with a small smile, the first Schanke had seen on his partner's face in at least three weeks.

"You look better, Knight, ya know? You were so...so...down! Did some girl dump you, or something?" This, of course, was a not so subtle inquiry into Knight's love life or lack thereof. Schanke still thought Nick had it bad for Nat, but Janette was a wow-babe that couldn't be ignored either. Ah, to be young, blond and stud material.

"Or something," Nick said in a friendly but noncommittal voice. "I'm going to drop off a few reports to Natalie. Want to come along?"

"Nah, go ahead. I'll be here for the next few centuries paying for being late."

Nick looked down at Schanke's balding head as he bent over the reports and felt a rush of affection for his human partner. Schanke was a good man, a good friend. One that he would have to leave very soon. Depressed again, Nick bid his partner a quiet farewell and walked out of the precinct and drove to the coroner's building. Natalie was buried up to her eyes in reports and looked up with a frown until she recognized the intruder. Her face became serious.

"Nick, how are you?"

"I'm better, Nat. I slept well. I ate."

"You drank blood?" Her voice was only faintly accusing.

"Yes," he said quietly, although he didn't mention it was human.

"Did you talk to LaCroix?" Natalie asked, laying her reports back on her desk.

"Yes," Nick said softly, and Nat sensed his reluctance to discuss what had happened.

"Is he after you?"

"Yes." His voice was terse and clipped.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" she asked pointedly.

"There isn't much I can do, Nat. You can't just say 'no' to LaCroix. Not without dire consequences."

Natalie ran her hand through her hair and tried to reason with him. "You mean there's nothing you can do to prevent him from spiriting you away?"

Nick sat down at the edge of her desk and picked up a pen and tapped agitatedly. "It's a very complicated relationship between a master vampire and his children. The master will always be stronger. The only way I could ever leave him would be if I killed him, which you saw was futile, or if he let me go. He's kept me on a long leash, and I've drifted off on my own from time to time, but he always found me. He's always two steps behind me. There's no way I could ever escape him."

"You could if he destroyed you, or if you committed suicide."

"True," Nick agreed quietly. "But that's not an option, is it? I can't end my life, because I still have to atone, and I still want to be human and LaCroix won't destroy me because he wants me with him."

"And you accept that?"

"I don't have much choice."

"What if he hurts you again, Nick?"

Nick was silent for a heartbeat. He looked like a lost little boy. "What if he doesn't?"

"Whoa, hold it! Do you actually think LaCroix has turned a new leaf? That he's going to be the father you always wanted? That he has learned the

error of his ways and after watching several hundred reruns of 'My Three Sons' and 'The Courtship of Eddie's Father' he now is newly qualified to be a loving daddy?" The sarcasm in her questions cut Nick deeply. The moment she said it, Nat regretted it. Nick couldn't help that he loved that son of ashe cut that thought off abruptly

"He says that he knows what's best for me. And that I will have to leave Toronto soon anyway."

"Okay, I'll accept leaving this particular city. But why not relocate somewhere where you can continue your search for a cure? Someplace where I can help you."

Nick's face became tightly drawn as he sifted through his own wishful dreams.

"He wouldn't allow it, Nat."

"What more can he do to you, Nick? He's already nearly tortured you to death. He's taken Arielle. You said he wouldn't kill you. What is it that you're afraid he'll do to you?"

"Not to me, Nat. To the mortals I care about. Schanke. Cohen. You."

"You think he'd kill us?"

"Not kill, necessarily. He has many other ways to inflict pain on me through other people. I can't risk your getting caught in the crossfire."

"I can take care of myself," she said determinately, but her face was shadowed by some secret fear.

"I can't stop what he's doing, Nat. He's going to bring me back one way or the other, unless I can find a way to escape him. There's not much time left."

Especially if you've half-given up already, Nat thought. She gnawed worriedly on her lower lip. "I'll keep looking, Nick. Maybe we can find a way to stall him or buy you some time."

"I hope so," he said. He looked haunted again. How difficult it must be to want to please a parent, no matter how abusive, and try to rationalize things. She was losing him, just as surely as she knew he was continuing his slide back into vampirism. But what to do?

"I'm taking my vacation effective this minute. I'll go back to university and the DNA experiments. Just because the litovuterine didn't work, doesn't mean that I can't find something that might."

That was his Natalie with her 'damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead' attitude. Perhaps she could help. Whatever small chance she offered, he would take it, but deep in his heart of hearts, he knew what the outcome would be. LaCroix had told him, and LaCroix was very seldom wrong.

"I'll leave it to you, Nat. I hope you find something."

Nat called her supervisor, shoved the folders in a drawer and put on her coat.

"You can drop me off at the university lab. I'll keep you informed of any progress."

Nick hesitated as he allowed her to precede him through the doorway.

"Nick, are you coming?"

"Right with you, Nat."

Despite her good intentions, Nat felt the sinking sensation that forces were at play that she would not be able to control.

It can't end like this, with barely a whimper, and Nick dutifully trotting off into the sunset with LaCroix. I won't let it. And on that note, Natalie Lambert prepared for the fight of her life.

CHAPTER 8

Arielle walked along the street near the library, unconsciously seeking the familiar landmarks of her mortal life. LaCroix walked several paces behind her, willing to indulge her need to seek out familiar places. Then without warning, a tall slender man rushed out the library door and ran into her, knocking his books to the ground.

"I'm so sorry!" she gasped, then looked up to see the familiar face of John Beckwith, her choral director.

"Arielle?" he said incredulously. "I...I thought you were dead! They said you had been killed!"

She looked around anxiously, hoping no one had spotted them. "It was a case of mistaken identity. I meant to come by and tell everyone, but with my parents deaths...." she shrugged as if to indicate how overwhelmed she had been.

Beckwith almost bounced with enthusiasm, his joy at seeing her alive beamed from his smile. He was in his late twenties, a martial arts instructor of some sort by profession, and passionate amateur musician. He lived for the opportunity of training and nurturing vocal music talent.

"Are you coming back to sing with us, Arielle?" he asked eagerly. "Easter is coming up in a few weeks, and I have a lot of solo pieces I'd like you to audition for. I know you could learn them fairly quickly."

"I don't know, Mr. Beckwith. The person that I'm living with now is kind of strict."

"Well, bring her along. Maybe if she sees what we do, she might agree to it."

"He. I, uh, don't think it would make any difference."

"Oh, is he a relative?" Beckwith asked with total disregard for social discretion.

"Well, uh, he..." she began, only to feel a familiar hand on her shoulder and the presence of the master vampire behind her.

"Friend of yours, my dear?" LaCroix asked in his best dragon voice, the one that made most mortals step back. It worked on Beckwith quite nicely. After he moved away, Beckwith stared at the tall imposing figure in black, and his eyes narrowed at the possessive way he held Arielle.

"John Beckwith," he said almost belligerently, not liking the feeling of fear that coursed over him. "I'm Arielle's vocal music teacher. I was stunned to find out she's still alive. I would like to have her come back and sing with our group."

"Lucien LaCroix," the stranger said, his eyes pinned the helpless mortal in place.

"Are you the relative she's living with now?"

LaCroix smiled slightly, then reached out to tangle his hand in Arielle's hair. He drew her face to him and kissed her lingeringly, then looked up calmly at the young mortal.

"I'm not a relative," he stated simply. The young man bristled with protectiveness.

"You're a little old for her, aren't you?" Beckwith asked snidely, and was instantly ashamed when he saw Arielle's tense features. He did not want to make her uncomfortable.

"I'm probably a 'little old' for most everyone." Arielle's eyes suddenly sparkled, and she fought the urge to giggle. The dry humor in LaCroix's voice was a welcome change from his usual sarcasm. Sensing her mirth, LaCroix looked down to smile at her, and she lost herself in his eyes. Clearing his throat, Beckwith tried to make a graceful exit from an obviously very private moment.

"I would like you to come to one of our rehearsals, Mr. LaCroix. I think Arielle should continue to work on her music. She's incredibly talented."

LaCroix fixed him with his ice blue eyes, then shrugged. "I have no objection to Arielle singing again."

Just like that. Arielle stared at him in puzzled wonder. He had given her all her music back to her, and without her needing to ask or beg for it. Then her eyes clouded over. It was a joke, or perhaps a privilege she would have to pay dearly for.

Beckwith saw the light fade from her face, and clenched his hands again, but relaxed them when he saw the tall man tip up her face and murmur to her in a low voice. Whatever he had said replaced her tentative smile, and she turned back to face her music teacher.

"I'll come to the next rehearsal, Mr. Beckwith. Thursday night?"

"Yes, Thursday," Beckwith said quietly, worry assailing him again. She was with a man old enough to be her father, and he didn't like the way the sinister-looking man seemed to control and intimidate her. There was

something not quite...right about him. He was so pale, and carried an air of menace that didn't seem human.

If I didn't know any better, I would say he's some sort of alien.

But that was nonsense, of course.

"Thank you for being so supportive of Arielle, Mr. LaCroix. I'm sure she's had a bad time of it lately, with the death of her parents."

If you only knew, she thought. There are more things in heaven and earth.

She reached out to shake Beckwith's hand and was startled when he reached out to hug her.

"I'm so glad you're alive, Arielle. He's treating you right?"

She nodded quickly, but he moved back to stare down into her face.

"He doesn't hurt you, does he?" he asked quietly, voicing his major concern.

LaCroix reached out and pulled Arielle back to him, a move of controlled strength. She flinched only slightly, but relaxed when the master vampire merely put his arm around her. Beckwith missed none of her expressions and clenched his hands again.

"If I were you, Mr. Beckwith, I wouldn't pry into things that aren't your concern. Curiosity killed far more than just the cat."

The dragon voice lifted the hairs on Beckwith's neck.

"You'd better treat her right," he blustered in a moment of naive altruism.

"Or what, my young friend?"

"Uh, I, uh...."

"Perhaps you'd like to rethink your position on this matter. I don't take kindly to interference from young pups with more bravado than common sense."

Arielle stiffened again, and LaCroix immediately eased up. He looked into the mortal's eyes, their heart beats syncopating, and Beckwith's gaze clouded.

"You will forget any animosity. Arielle and I are close...friends. You are pleased that she has someone to care for her. All is well."

"All is well," Beckwith echoed faintly, then shook his head and focused on the tall sinister man. He still didn't feel right about the man, but if Arielle was happy, that was all that mattered.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. LaCroix. Will you try to make it to the rehearsal?"

"I wouldn't miss it," LaCroix said gravely, his eyes amused as he watched the young man shake his head befuddledly, absently bid Arielle farewell and walk off with his books.

"He was only trying to help me," Arielle said quietly.

"That's the reason I let him live," LaCroix said in his most polite tones. Arielle quaked inwardly. He didn't have to even try to be intimidating. She squared her shoulders and turned to face the master vampire. He reached out, and hesitantly she took his hand. With great care, he drew her to him and wrapped his arms around her.

She sighed as she let him engulf her and sweep her up into the sky.

Several days later, Arielle entered the class room nervously, LaCroix a silent menacing shadow behind her. Her ensemble members looked up in disbelief, then astonished happiness as they realized that she wasn't dead. Apparently Mr. Beckwith meant her return to be a surprise. LaCroix stood back as they gathered around her, asking millions of questions and chattering excitedly. Arielle was touched by their easy affection and caring. She had never been able to reciprocate their level of friendliness, yet they still gave it.

Beckwith handed Arielle a huge folder of the ensemble material plus solo works he wanted her to audition for. Her head swam with the sheer magnitude of material. The others finally noticed the tall sinister man in black leaning against the wall. Each looked uneasily at the other, then to Beckwith. Who was this guy?

"Class, we're lucky to get Arielle back. She's gone through some tough times with her parents dying, plus her own injuries." Her explanation about a car accident seemed to be going over fairly well.

"Who's he?" one asked in low tones, starting when the stranger's eyes narrowed. He couldn't have possibly heard that question, could he?

"My name is LaCroix," came the dark voice with its aristocratic accent. The voice raised the hair on their collective necks.

Arielle smiled weakly, tried to deflect their interest and any questions.

Please, don't ask. Don't make him notice you.

LaCroix walked over and casually glanced through the music Arielle held. He made a small sound of approval. The selections were uniformly excellent. Beckwith might be a mortal upstart, but he knew his music.

"I commend you on your choices, Beckwith. Arielle will do well with the solos."

There was a collective exhalation as the tension was broken. The sinister man was now charming, in a predatory kind of way. The tall man sat down near the wall as he watched Beckwith start rehearsal. It was grueling, intense, vibrant. The young people sweated and worked as they learned their music. They were very good, but when Arielle sang the soprano solo in the choral piece you could have heard a pin drop. It was an absolutely pure voice. Arielle would never have the intensity for opera, or the sharp edging needed for popular music, but for the classics, for liturgical music, she would shine forever. LaCroix closed his eyes as he listened. She was truly without

equal. If he allowed her to continue her studies, she could achieve unparalleled greatness, but only for a few short years before her identity and life would have to change. The world would rediscover her voice at certain intervals, decades apart, and that would be all the sweeter. *We have world enough, and time....*

CHAPTER 9

Nick took to the skies, heading toward the house that he had long refused to visit. He was unable to say what called him, but he had to see Arielle. Janette's report of her fear and insecurity gnawed inside him. He never should have let her decide to go with the master vampire. She couldn't have known what LaCroix would do to her. There were many things he should never have done, beginning with a hellish pact made eight hundred years ago. Soon he was at the mansion that LaCroix called home.

Nick hesitated at the door, then opened it to step into the ornate hallway. He looked around, but did not see them. Then a doorway opened to reveal LaCroix clad only in black silk pajama bottoms. Spotting Nick, he smiled.

"Nicolas. What a pleasant surprise. To what do I owe this honor?"

Nick opened his mouth to speak, then stopped when he glimpsed Arielle's small face peering out from behind LaCroix. With an easy movement, LaCroix moved Arielle out in front of him and cradled her back against him. He dwarfed her small body as she stood clad in his pajama top and nothing else. It was more than obvious what Nick had interrupted. Arielle stared at the visitor, then her smile broke out like the sun through clouds. She stepped forward to go to him, but LaCroix pulled her back possessively.

"Nick!" she said joyously, and again tried to move forward, but LaCroix kept her firmly pinned against him. She looked up bewilderedly. Why was he keeping her from greeting Nick?

"Remember who owns you now, Arielle."

Nicks fists clenched as he saw the way Arielle cringed slightly at the reminder. Her hair was slightly tangled, and her bare toes curled on the marble floor. LaCroix watched Nicolas's bristling with amusement, and taunted him further as he slid his hand over Arielle's body. She shivered, passion lighting her eyes gold, and Nick choked on what he considered blasphemous liberties with ..., no, she wasn't Fleur. He felt the raging protectiveness any brother would feel for a younger sister.

"Nothing to say, Nicolas?"

Nick reached and yanked Arielle from the elder, and stared worriedly down at her. She seemed to be all right. But was she really? LaCroix allowed the movement and watched idly as Nick cupped Arielle's face.

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"Nothing to say, Nicolas?"

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"Are you OK?"

Arielle smiled tremulously, and reached up to lightly touch Nick's face.

"I'm fine, Nick. I missed you so very much." There were tears in her eyes, and Nick frowned.

"Has he hurt you?"

She bit her lip and stared up at the vampire she loved like a brother, and who, if LaCroix was to be believed, really was her brother. She didn't answer, and Nick hugged her close, rocking her as his own eyes filled. Remembering what LaCroix had done to him before, he was unwilling to think of what the master vampire might have inflicted on her. As he became aware of the scantily clothing she wore, he began to understand the relative difference in what Janette had endured as opposed to him.

"Why, LaCroix? Why did you have to hurt her?"

"Nicolas, who says I have harmed her?"

Nick's expression spoke volumes. LaCroix's smile was mocking.

"There is always some degree of pain until a child learns to please and obey a parent. I think Arielle and I have made significant progress in our relationship, haven't we, my dear?"

The sensuality in LaCroix's gaze raised Nick's hackles. He still couldn't accept it.

Nick raised her face and stared at her.

"You don't have to do this, Arielle. I can find a way out for you."

LaCroix reached out and captured Arielle's small wrist and pulled her back. Despite the way she shuddered, Arielle instinctively leaned into LaCroix's chest. Nick was shocked. She wanted to be there.

Nick watched with fascination as LaCroix's face softened as she burrowed closer. He cradled her almost tenderly. The master vampire had a light in his eyes that made the blue color almost serene. It was a look that Nick had only seen once before, when LaCroix had met Fleur.

"LaCroix, is she really...?"

LaCroix knew what Nick was asking. "I know she is, Nicolas."

LaCroix whispered something to her and Arielle turned to go back into the other room. She reappeared a few minutes later dressed in lounging pajamas. She looked much older than she had a few weeks ago, but perhaps it was just the new wisdom in her eyes.

"Come with us, Nicolas. There is something I want you to hear."

Nick followed the two vampires upstairs to the conservatory. LaCroix had put on a robe, but his feet were still bare, and oblivious to the cold. He sat at the piano and pulled down some music.

"The Mozart piece, I think, Arielle."

Arielle nodded as she stood behind LaCroix and studied the notes. They had been practicing the piece for several days. LaCroix played a

smooth introduction, and Arielle began to sing. Nick listened in stunned silence. Her voice was more beautiful and ethereal now than ever. She had lost nothing since being brought across. High, low the notes soared upward in the acoustically perfect room, reverberating into Nick's heart. Her voice vanquished him. LaCroix had regained more than Fleur. He had somehow captured a piece of heaven. Arielle sang the piece to its conclusion, and then looked expectantly at Nick.

"It was beautiful, Arielle," Nick said softly, realizing what an understatement that was.

Arielle smiled shyly, and when LaCroix motioned to her, she left the room. Nick and LaCroix were alone.

"How can she still sing like that? How can she still have a soul? You said vampires would never be able to match mortals in the arts because they didn't have a soul."

"I really don't know, Nicolas. It's an astounding gift that she has. Almost as if she hasn't fully crossed over yet. She refuses to kill." LaCroix sounded both possessive and proud. Was that indulgence in his eyes?

"Do you love her, LaCroix?" Nick had asked the question once before, on the rooftop where LaCroix had brought Arielle across and then stolen away with her. Whatever his sins, LaCroix could be forgiven if he truly cared for Arielle. Wasn't that why Nick had tried so hard throughout the centuries to please his master? Had stuck with him despite the abuse, the casual cruelties, the neglect? Had prayed for any small crumb of affection to keep his spirit alive?

LaCroix frowned deeply, his features took on forbidding lines. Nick froze at the expression that had usually heralded some type of retaliation or punishment, a flood of rage that had desimated everything in its path. Instinctively, Nick swallowed. It was just as bad as when he had found out that he had not destroyed LaCroix in his loft after all. The sick feeling in the pit of his stomach as he had watched LaCroix emerge from the shadows of the warehouse like a vengeful demon.

"I care for her, Nicolas, just as I care for you and Janette."

Nick swallowed again.

"You don't believe me?"

"I...I don't know."

"Nicolas, you are making mountains out of molehills again. Arielle is fine. It was a bit...unsettled at first, but I think we understand each other better. You and Janette will be joining us shortly. What more could a father ask?"

"LaCroix, I can't just leave. I..."

"Think on it, Nicolas. You still have a little time. Your true nature will guide you to what must be done." With that, LaCroix smiled, and despite the now pleasant set of his features, there was watchfulness in his eyes.

"We'll talk again, Nicolas. Very soon. Arielle enjoyed seeing you again."

LaCroix walked out of the room and shut the door behind him, leaving Nick alone in the foyer. He stood there for endless minutes, waiting for some cry or scream, but heard nothing except a low murmur and a lighter counterpoint that muffled into silence. Shaken, he walked downstairs and out the door and rose into the night sky. He got home and realized belatedly that he had forgotten to tell Nat where he was going. Then the thought disappeared in a wave of exhaustion as he tumbled onto the couch and dragged a blanket around him.

Surprisingly, he slept without dreaming.

Natalie punched in the security code and rode the elevator up to Nick's loft. He hadn't been there earlier when she had checked, and she had driven around town for hours looking for him. She was semi-frantic and quite irritated.

Stepping into the apartment, she saw Nicolas fast asleep on the sofa. The sunrise would be coming soon and he didn't stir. A blanket half-covered him, and the lines of worry in his face had smoothed out. His hair was tousled over his forehead, and Natalie was again struck at how young and vulnerable he looked. But he wasn't young. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

She sat in the chair across from him in the darkened apartment and watched him sleep, feeling the anger slowly slip away to be replaced by tenderness. She had made absolutely no progress in finding a cure. And now time was running out.

"What are we going to do, Nick?" she whispered. But he slept on, oblivious to her question. That worried her as well. Normally he would have woken immediately upon sensing her presence, but he seemed oblivious.

She got up and walked over to him. She traced his face with her fingertips, but he didn't stir. She felt the peacefulness in him, and wondered what had brought about that miracle. Then she felt a shadow moving across her and spun around to see LaCroix standing next to the fireplace, smiling blandly at her.

"You!" she exclaimed. She clenched her fists as she checked the angry words that would have spilled out next.

"Yes, my dear doctor. I'm flattered that you remember." She recalled their restaurant meeting and choked down her anger.

"What have you done to him?" she asked in tight tones, trying not to let emotion overrule her common sense.

"Why, nothing, my dear. He's sleeping. He's very tired. Exhausted would be a better term."

"He's an emotional wreck," Nat said bluntly, clenching her fists. "He's scared to death that you're coming after him."

LaCroix smiled again, his head tilted slightly as he viewed her righteous indignation. She really was a lovely woman, with intelligence, and passion. Pity she was a mortal. "He would be correct in that assumption."

"Why?" she asked vehemently, "Why are you torturing him like this? I thought you cared about him. Why are you trying to hurt him?"

LaCroix's expression became politely condescending, and his voice dropped to the soothing pitch one used for fractious infants. "My dear doctor, I am not trying to hurt Nicolas. He has lost his way and I am guiding him back to the fold, so to speak."

"Don't try to make yourself out as a good shepherd. No one who cared about somebody would terrorize them like that."

"Nicolas, unfortunately, has a tendency to resist anything that he doesn't think of himself, and he cannot face what he truly is: a vampire."

"He wants to be mortal! He has tried so hard to become human, to redeem himself for the sins he committed. He wants salvation, and all he gets from you is scorn and abuse."

"I am not mocking his misguided need for redemption. It's the Catholic upbringing that colors everything he does, and weighs him with guilt. He rebels and fights for his cause, and I can respect that, but only to a point. All his wishful thinking will not change what he is. He will never achieve mortality. His true nature will surface again and again until he cannot control it any longer. Do not make the mistake of thinking that he is human. He is not."

"Why are you after him now?" Nat almost pleaded.

"It's time," LaCroix stated simply. "We must move on. Nicolas knows we can only stay a few years in one place before we recreate our identities and find a new location. And all his and your attempts to regain his mortality have been in vain. He has been backsliding. Surely even you have noticed that."

Yes, she had, and the fact that LaCroix was right infuriated her.

"We were so close!" she hissed in frustration. "He doesn't want to go with you. He's afraid of you!"

"Yes, I know," LaCroix said.

His small smile drove Nat to making a statement she immediately regretted. "I know what you did to him after Fleur died."

In a instant, LaCroix was beside her, twisting her head back and examining her throat with interest. His tightened lips were the only sign that she had provoked him, other than the grip he had on her. "Do you? Oh my, Nicolas really must stop telling tales."

She could feel the power and controlled anger in the master vampire and swallowed with difficulty. She didn't want to die. She looked at Nick's innocent sleeping face and felt tears well up.

"He doesn't deserve to be hurt like that," she whispered and sniffed back her tears.

LaCroix's hold loosened as he turned the pathologist to face him. Looking directly into her eyes, he spoke, "That's in the past. I shall never hurt him like that again. Tell me, doctor, what parent has never made mistakes? Do you think I would allow Nicolas to destroy himself after eight hundred years?"

Natalie was fascinated and repelled by the stark emotion in LaCroix's face and voice. "He wants to be human. If you really loved him, you'd let him go."

"There is a difference in allowing freedom of choice and permitting suicidal behavior. Despite his age, Nicolas has yet to attain the maturity to make such a decision, and in any case, it's a moot point. He cannot become mortal, and it's time that he realized it."

"So you'll hound him until he gives in. Cut off all his escapes, terrorize him into submission and say it's for his own good."

"Very good, my dear. You're a better psychologist than I thought."

"That's not love," she said bitterly. "It's possession."

"I can't expect you to understand our way of thinking, but please don't entertain any foolish ideas about trying to stop me. We both know what happened the last time you and I met."

The Azure. The mind control that LaCroix had exerted over her with such effortlessness. "You can't kill me," she said with bravado. "Nick would never forgive you for it."

It was then that his smile chilled her to the bone. She must never forget the degree of power she was dealing with.

"Who said anything about killing, my dear? I have other methods of bringing both vampires and mortals to heel."

The silk gloves were now off. She was at a complete disadvantage and dependent on his mercy, and it galled her to no end. Her expression, half-frightened, half-irked unexpectedly charmed the vampire holding her.

"What a waste on humanity you are, my dear. You would make such a splendid vampire." With that he tilted her head again and brought his mouth to her neck. She felt the barest touch of his fangs and did the only thing left she could do: prayed. After several agonizing seconds, LaCroix withdrew to look down at her again. His eyes were blue and the fangs no longer visible.

"No?" he asked.

"No," she gritted. He let her go.

"I'm going to keep looking for a cure," she said quietly.

LaCroix acknowledged his opponent with a gracious nod. "As you wish, but time is running out. Nicolas will leave with me very soon, and before you stammer your next round of protests, it will be of his own choice."

"How do you know that he'll agree?" she asked tightly.

"After eight hundred years, I know my Nicolas far better than you ever will. He cares deeply for you, but that is not enough."

"I love him!" she said, tears welling up as she realized that the balance was tilting against her. She expected a typically arrogant and cutting response, but what she saw in LaCroix's face was...regret?

"I'm sorry for that. I know well what agony a love between mortal and vampire can bring. He will leave you, and you must accept that. I won't tolerate interference, however insignificant it may be."

Natalie went over and laid her head against Nick's chest and clutched him, willing her love to be enough to hold him. A cold hand clasped her shoulder. She looked up at LaCroix's face, blurred by her tears.

"One day, after we have moved on, I will come back to see you. I will offer you a choice, to forget what you had with Nicolas, or to end your suffering. And for you, my dear, because you are a unique, intelligent and beautiful woman, I might even offer to bring you across."

"Why?" she choked.

"Because Nicolas cares for you, and because you have been of great service to the community."

"Never!" she said fiercely, but the little voice inside her wasn't quite so sure.

"You've been a most interesting adversary, Natalie Lambert. I have no wish to cause you harm, but I cannot allow you to interfere with what must be. It will all be over soon." His hand caressed her hair in an oddly tender gesture, and then he was gone.

Natalie curled up on the couch and held Nick close, crying silently against his chest until she fell asleep in utter exhaustion. She knew that things were heading toward a closure she couldn't fight.

Chapter 10

"Tonight is the concert," Arielle said timidly as she dressed in a dark blue formal dress, mindful that a certain propriety and decorum was called for in an evening recital.

"Yes, I remember," LaCroix said shortly.

Arielle winced slightly at the flat disinterest in his tone. "You don't have to come if you don't want to," she said quietly.

"I can't miss your recital, my dear. After sitting through all those rehearsals, what would your colleagues think?"

LaCroix had never worried about what mortals thought, and the irony of his tones scraped along her frayed nerves.

"It's important to me."

He seemed to relax slightly.

"I know. Forgive me. I have things on my mind."

Arielle glanced at the address she had scribbled on a piece of paper.

"I'm not sure where this place is but I imagine we can find it."

LaCroix glanced at the address and escorted Arielle out the door. A waiting taxi stood in front of the house. Arielle looked at LaCroix with puzzlement.

"We have to appear to be mortal, for your friends' sakes." His consideration made her feel warm inside.

When the taxi delivered them to the address she had given the driver, she stepped out in disbelief.

"It can't be!" she said, a note of hysteria in her voice.

"Oh, but it can," LaCroix said as he paid the driver and added a generous tip. They stood in front of one of the oldest and most beautiful churches in Toronto. A Catholic church.

Arielle raised stricken eyes to the master vampire.

"We can't go in there, not anymore."

LaCroix was about to make a sarcastic remark, but stopped when he saw the sorrow and pain on Arielle's face. It was more than missing the concert. It was a cruel reminder of what her existence now was. Her fall from divine grace.

"We still can try, Arielle."

The music. She could not let go of the music. No matter what obstacles. She mounted the steps and approached the great wooden door. Hand on the latch, she hesitated.

Please, God, just this once. Then I'll never darken your door again.

She opened the door and stepped inside, the familiar scent of incense a wax bringing back her childhood memories. When her father was still alive. When she had still believed.

There was no flash of fire, or burning pain. It felt cool and welcoming. LaCroix stood beside her, only his clenched jaw indicating his discomfort.

"I don't feel it."

"Feel what, Arielle?"

"There's no pain. It doesn't hurt to be here." She turned to touch his face, worry creasing her brow. "But it hurts you. We'll leave."

"No, your concert will be starting soon. I can tolerate it."

His age, she supposed. His great power allowed him to tolerate what another vampire couldn't. But why should she be spared?

"Why didn't I...?" she began, but LaCroix silenced her with a gentle hand over her mouth.

"Perhaps it was just meant to be." He looked up abruptly, sensing another presence. *Fleur, I can feel you here. Are you the one shielding Arielle?*

LaCroix sat down in a pew that would allow him to look up into the choir loft, unmindful of the other people arriving and crowding in, eager to hear the concert. *An Easter concert*, thought LaCroix, with full appreciation for the irony of the similarity between the Resurrection and his own 'rebirth'.

Another fifteen minutes passed with latecomers and warmups that LaCroix's sensitive ears picked up through two closed doors. The choir moved to the loft and assembled. Only candles lit the massive church, adding to the atmosphere. LaCroix gazed at the figures and paintings, appreciating some of the mystery and ceremony behind the Catholic religion of Nicolas's. He fought against the pain of being in a sacred place, and then it faded to the barest tingle. *Fleur*.

The concert was a progression of the Passion of Christ, with lovely choral pieces and stirring solos. Arielle shone beyond all of them, LaCroix thought, her voice seemed to reach the high ceiling and soar far above it to the heavens. *If there is a God, he would surely hear her.*

He felt the pain in the music, and despite his best intentions, his thoughts went back in time.

Within a few minutes, Valerius lay dead, his throat slit, his body stabbed and slashed dozens of times.

Not nearly enough suffering, thought Lucius as he eyed the corpse dispassionately. He felt frozen inside, no longer capable of feeling anything at all. Not fear, not rage, not pity or sorrow. His mother had died, and he had killed his father. Lucius lost awareness of the physical pain of his injuries, and without trumpet or fanfare, whatever small remnants that had been bright and good inside him were snuffed out like a candle.

Lucius washed the blood off his hands and changed his garments. He gathered a few personal items, then created a disturbance outside to summon the servants and slaves. They rushed outside, and after Lucius accounted for all of them, he set the house on fire. It burned well, and even if it was eventually extinguished, the bodies of his mother and father would be burned beyond recognition. There would be no mortal punishment for what Valerius had done, or for Lucius's revenge. There would also be no forgiveness.

LaCroix returned to the present day, and felt his rage and sorrow overwhelm him. Nothing would diminish this pain. Not some ancient religion, not this structure and the symbols it contained, not the faith that sustained

these mortal souls who believed in it. Then Arielle began to sing again, and he froze as the words floated down to him.

*Ave Maria
Gratia plena, Dominus tecum*

The soaring soprano tribute to the love of the Virgin Mary, the Mother, delved into his cold and shuttered heart. The mother who would forgive any sin. Who would love her son, no matter what he did. LaCroix stood up unsteadily and worked his way past the people sitting in his pew and walked outside. He breathed in the cool night air and exhaled harshly. He leaned against the sturdy oak tree, and looked up at the night skies, which blurred together in a face he had not seen for a long, long time. Her face was sorrowful.

I'm sorry, Mother. I killed to avenge you. I killed my own father, and I have lived with that for two thousand years. I can't change the past, no more than I can bring you back to me, or bring back Fleur. I can't change what I am.

This time she smiled, her love overshadowing the sorrow. He then felt her linger over him, drawing away the pain, and leaving a peaceful void within his many turbulent memories. It was over. He had come full circle in this particular guilt, and now could move on. He felt her fade away, and sighed.

Even I must grow and change.

The church doors opened and the audience began moving out. LaCroix waited patiently until Arielle came out and spotted him.

"Are you all right?" she asked worriedly. "I saw you leave."

"I'm fine now, Arielle. You sang superbly."

"What happened?" she asked curiously, but LaCroix merely took her hand to guide her down the sidewalk and onto the night streets.

"Nothing," he replied, "Just an old ghost laid to rest."

He let them soar into the skies.

Chapter 11

The criminal was dead, twisted and broken on the ground, but the girl still stood immobile, unable to flee from the hypnotic eyes that burned into her. She watched as the man, no he was not a man, reach out to her.

"Come to me." the creature commanded, but she was frozen like a deer in the headlights, so he moved toward her until he stood only inches from her. He reached out and wrapped her in his arms, pinning her back against him as he grabbed her hair and pulled her head back. She now

fought against his vampire strength as he twisted her head to bare her neck, ignoring her pleas for mercy. Her wishes didn't matter. Nothing mattered except the blood. He tore into her throat, leaving her arching helplessly against the pain. Her tears slid over his hands as he drank the life from her. They were warm, like her blood, and burned into his skin as the taste of her blood fed long denied appetites. Her protests had merely whetted his hunger, fueled his blood lust until he had completed his feast. There was pleasure in both the willing and unwilling victim, and her terror spiced her blood most intoxicatingly.

She sagged limply in his arms as her life faded, and Nicolas noted almost absently that her tears and breathing had stopped simultaneously. She had died for his pleasure, and, to his shame, he would have done it again. Nick looked up toward the turrets that marked the end of the bridge. LaCroix stood with his arms crossed, laughing in delight.

"Yes, Nicolas! This is what you are!"

Nick threw his head back and howled his rage and grief.

Nick woke and wiped his sweat-drenched forehead with a trembling hand. It had seemed so real. He got up, showered quickly and dressed in jeans and a blue silk shirt Natalie had given him. Nick pulled a bottle of cow's blood from the refrigerator and uncorked it with his teeth. Spitting out the cork he drank in large gulps, spilled blood over his chin and onto his shirt. He leaned back against the fireplace mantle and stared out into the night. He mentally calculated the hours until sunrise. Perhaps he should wait in front of the window until the daylight ended his troubles once and for all. But if he killed himself, there would be no hope for redemption.

Damned if I do, damned if I don't.

Nick stiffened. Someone was there. Spinning, he turned to face LaCroix, who watched him from beneath hooded eyes.

"Having doubts again, Nicolas?"

Nick didn't answer, unwilling to get into yet another argument.

"You may continue on your quest for redemption, but you can never deny what you are, and the powers your state gives you. You will be young and handsome and powerful forever. You chose this, Nicolas. Does it gall you to realize that you really do want to be this? That despite all your protestations, you know that you want to be a vampire?"

Nick thought of the dream he had had. The killing that went against every moral teaching and belief he now upheld, and how he had reveled in it despite his good intentions. He had savored the death of both a criminal and an innocent, and had been unmoved by either the frightened curses of the murderer or the pitiful, tearful protests of the innocent bystander he had drained.

Nick slumped against the window frame, his head sagging. "The beast wins again."

"Not a beast, Nicolas. Your true nature. You are a killer, the superior species meant to hunt and rule the night."

Nick's face was twisted with bitter self-loathing.

"I never *will* become human, will I, LaCroix?"

"No, Nicolas, and in time you will realize that the mortality you have sought is just a means to an end. You want forgiveness from your God, and thought the only way was to become mortal. But you don't want to grow old and die. You want to be forgiven *and* live forever."

Simply put, but so true. He wanted it all. And he couldn't have it.

"I almost thought I'd make it. Redemption and mortality. Not even a thousand years would undo what I have done, would it, LaCroix?"

LaCroix deliberated. Then he spoke.

"In all honesty, Nicolas, if I put myself in your place, then I would say that no length of time would be enough. You *will* revert to your true nature. That is inevitable, and then you will beat your chest and wail when it occurs. No, Nicolas. You will serve your penance for eternity, because there is one person who will never be able to forgive you. No matter how hard you try, there will always be that barrier between you and that elusive state of paradise, your golden gates of heaven."

"Who, LaCroix?"

"You, Nicolas. You will never forgive yourself, and so any higher judgement in your favor would be moot. Eight hundred years of guilt. It will truly drive you mad, Nicolas, if you let it. So why not accept what you are and move on?"

"Would He forgive me, as long as I am this?" Nick said bitterly.

"It's a fascinating theology, Catholicism. Guilt drives almost every thing you do. Believe you are damned and you will be. Believe you are forgiven, and you will be. Or do you not believe? Is that the problem, Nicolas? Lack of faith?"

Nick sucked in his breath as the arrow hit home. LaCroix always knew how to hit him in the most vulnerable areas. He was a failure as a human, because he couldn't achieve that state of being. Indeed, he was backsliding more and more as his vampire nature came out. He was a failure as a vampire because he couldn't embrace the darkness. Nick stared out into the night and felt like crying.

LaCroix reached out and grasped Nicolas's shoulder to offer a father's comfort.

"Nicolas, you are creating your own hell. Why not just acknowledge what you are and make the best of it? You are what you are, and as such are more human than I would ever want to be. Dark and light, good and evil,

they're all such relative terms. Be true to yourself, and your own personal code, and then you wouldn't face these conflicts."

Nick stared at LaCroix with resignation. LaCroix didn't seem bothered by the countless conflicting emotions Nick had warring inside him. LaCroix seemed at peace with himself and the universe. The inner demons that had glimpsed out over the centuries appeared to have been banished. Or carefully banked, like burning embers. Ready to erupt if needed, somnolent for now. How he envied LaCroix that!

"I wish I could be so sure of myself. How is it you were able to achieve that, LaCroix? Surely you had at least as many doubts as I did in the beginning." *And the rage that made you lash at Janette and me*, he added silently.

LaCroix gave him the strange half-smile that infuriated Nick so because it could mean anything at all. "Like all beings, Nicolas, I, too, have reached milestones in my development. We are constantly growing, and coming to terms with things in our past, both good and bad. I have regrettably done things that adversely affected our relationship, but I can say it will not happen again."

Nick shuddered a bit, and the tremor was instantly transmitted to the hand that grasped him. LaCroix hesitated, then spoke.

"I would undo those things, if I could, but it's part of our past and will remain so. We shall no doubt clash many times, as we both are quite strong-willed, but never would I do what I had done before. I tortured you. You 'killed' me. I want this animosity to stop. I'm the only father you have, and you are my only son. Janette, my daughter. And Arielle, well, she's become as important to me as you two are."

Nick stared out the window silently, and LaCroix tightened his grip on Nick's shoulder and turned the younger vampire to face him.

"It's past time, Nicolas. We must move on. We belong together. Even you know that, deep down."

Yes, he knew. And even though he knew it to be the truth, he couldn't stand the thought of leaving Natalie, and Schanke and all his mortal friends behind. Or his dream for redemption.

"You feel too much, Nicolas. You care for these mortals far, far too much. It will only hurt you in the end."

"I can't help how I feel, LaCroix. Or what I am inside. You knew that when you brought me across."

LaCroix nodded. "The good with the bad, Nicolas. I can accept that, if you can."

Nick stood up straight and squared his shoulders as he turned to face LaCroix.

"I agree, LaCroix. We'll move on together."

That statement cost him dearly, and LaCroix saw the tremor that racked his son as he faced the inevitable. Nicolas's carefully crafted mortal existence was unraveling, and with it the convictions he had held so long. Nick's world was rocking off its axis, and he floundered to regain stable footing.

"It's all right, Nicolas. It really will be all right."

"I wish I could believe that, LaCroix." Nick's voice wavered and LaCroix saw that his son was again close to tears. "I won't see Natalie again. Or Schanke, or Captain Cohen, or any of the other mortals that are in my life."

"I can always bring your little pets across for you."

"No! Please, LaCroix, don't take their light away."

"Very well, Nicolas. Whatever you wish."

Then make it stop. Make this pain stop and make me forget the life I've had here, and the love I leave behind. Make me happy again.

LaCroix read him easily. "I can do that, Nicolas, if you cooperate with me. I can make you forget this last few years, even longer if you wish. I can make this time in Toronto a dream that never happened. Is that what you truly want? To forget?"

Is that what he wanted? Forget both good and bad, and move ahead with LaCroix, Janette and Arielle? "I don't know" Nick murmured in distress.

"Look at me, Nicolas." LaCroix reached out to grasp his face and forced Nick to gaze in his eyes. "I'll gladly make you forget everything, but with that you may lose the very thing that has brought you back to your senses. We are the sum of our experiences, after all."

Still Nick hesitated.

"Think about it, Nicolas. You must tell me your decision soon. This particular chapter in our lives is nearly over."

Nick nodded, and he turned again to face the night. His face was so young and vulnerable that LaCroix hesitated. He was not Nicolas the fiery rebellious adolescent, or the eager killer of centuries before. He looked ...lost. LaCroix shook himself mentally. That, too, would go away as Nicolas regained his rightful place. When he stopped fighting his true nature.

"I will be leaving you, Nicolas. You have three days to take care of any loose ends, and then we will leave Toronto. Our belongings can be shipped later. The Community will help in that regard."

"Yes, LaCroix" Nicolas said, but his voice was dispirited. Fatigue sapped all his vitality, and grief made him a mere shadow of what he was.

"Get some rest, Nicolas."

"Yes, LaCroix," Nick said obediently, but when LaCroix left him, Nick was still in the same position at the window, staring into the night with unseeing eyes.

Janette was quite calm as she dressed for another night in the club. She knew that LaCroix would be back to 'discuss' matters. He had made his decision, and she knew she couldn't fight it. She was tired. Tired of fighting Nicola's search for mortality and redemption, tired of securing his affection from the mortal coroner, tired of trying to protect Arielle, tired of trying to assert her independence from the master vampire. It was all so pointless. LaCroix would always have the upper hand, and surely his careless affection meant that he did value her to some degree. Or he wouldn't bother with her at all. Unless she was just a pawn to get Nicola back. She tightened her jaw at that thought. If LaCroix could be persuaded to put kid gloves on over his iron fists, then life might just be bearable.

We are different from humans, and our relationships are much more complex. Nothing is black or white, only shades of gray.

She walked into the club as Miklos and the others prepared for the night. The club would open in less than an hour. She sipped from the glass Miklos handed to her, then felt the presence. Turning, she faced LaCroix, incredibly sensual in his black suit. He really was quite lovely to watch. A black wolf, or panther. An elegant predatory beast.

"Janette," LaCroix acknowledged, kissing her gloved hand with careless charm.

"LaCroix," she replied, her voice only the tiniest bit strained. He heard it and looked down at her with his little half-smile. She shivered, then calmed. He had the uncanny knack of being able to both frighten and soothe her with a single word or gesture. *Power, she thought. He has only grown stronger with time. He hides his anger better, even better than a few months ago. What has brought about such change?*

Arielle, no doubt. She had been the catalyst in all their lives. Or was it Fleur?

"Why so afraid, Janette? Do you think I mean you harm?"

"Of course not!" she retorted, but her slight tremor gave her away.

"Still suspicious, still distrustful," LaCroix sighed heavily.

Janette remained silent, not trusting herself to blurt out some comment that might incite his anger, and too wary to voice the questions that burned inside her.

"Shall we dance?" he invited.

LaCroix reached out and drew her to him as he signaled for the music to begin. He lead her through steps that they had perfected at least two hundred years ago. The music sparked memories of better times: the carnivals and festivals of Venice, the grandeur of Vienna, the mysticism of the Far East. With Nicola she had danced with passion, but with LaCroix, it

had been poetry. A perfect symphony of music and movement. She had missed that more than she could say.

They danced silently for a while as they grew accustomed to each other once more, their movements blending into perfect harmony. There was not the passion she had with Nicola, or the frenzied lust with various male companions over the centuries, but the perfection of two minds and bodies creating beauty. When she had danced with LaCroix, that *had* been a better love than whatever physical relationship they had once shared. Music had been his all-consuming passion, besides his obsession with his son, and the only times Janette felt she was close to him was when they shared the dance.

Janette closed her eyes as she moved closer to him, now allowing his body to brush against hers as their dance changed with the rhythm and tempo of the music. Fast, slow, dreamy, intense, they moved in perfect time. Miklos and the others watched silently at the picture the two vampires made. Janette opened her eyes to look into LaCroix's face, expecting to see his enigmatic, watchful gaze, but instead saw a small smile. He looked more at peace with himself than in any time of their relationship. Was he truly enjoying himself as much as she? Or was it just another manipulative game? Reading her face, his features tightened, then a flame lit his eyes as he deliberately led and she followed. She gazed into his blue eyes and lost herself as she had nine centuries before.

For an interminable period they danced, giving themselves to the one passion they could share. Finally he stopped, and silently indicated to Miklos to cut the music.

LaCroix cradled her close for a time, then led Janette back to the bar as Miklos handed them glasses of her best private stock. Janette leaned against the bar, her eyes half- closed. She stiffened as she remembered why LaCroix had come here in the first place.

"It can be good again, Janette. All of us together. We are a family and have spent far too much time apart."

Yes, perhaps, but only until LaCroix lost his temper and struck out again. He had not physically harmed her since that second night, but his words, and careless disregard had bruised her heart and spirit many, many times. Abuse wasn't always physical.

"No, Janette. I have no wish to hurt any of you like that again."

He had read her thoughts again and Janette bit her lower lip. He could read her like a book, play her like his rebec, manipulate her thoughts and feelings like some master puppeteer. How could she for a moment think his affection was real?

LaCroix reached out, and in his eyes she saw an emotion she had not seen since Fleur had died. Reaching out his hand, he led her to the back room.

"I will share with you, Janette, so you will understand."

He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled the collar from his throat. Reaching out, he pulled Janette close to him. He tipped his head back, guided her face to his throat and commanded her silently.

She bit, and as his blood flowed into her, the images flashed inside her head. Terrible emotions of pain and anger, the visions of a small, beaten boy and his mother, the tyrant who had later died at the hands of his son. The time when LaCroix had crossed over, and when he had brought Nicola and herself across. The faintest glimpse of a young blonde girl, which was then ruthlessly suppressed. Janette wondered who she had been to LaCroix, for he had never spoken of her.

In him she felt the lust for the darkness, his thirst for knowledge, his passion for music, his loneliness and need in creating his children, and the fragile broken love that had died with Fleur. She felt his centuries of anguish, his rages against Nicola's rebellions and his fear of losing his son, and the hope that had surfaced when he had found Arielle. In just a few minutes, she experienced glimpses of what made LaCroix what he was. She had been given the rarest of gifts: his memories.

Janette pulled back and stared into the master vampire's face. How could she have known the pain that was inside him? It made the rages much more explainable, though not forgivable. He was flawed. Imperfect. *Human*. She reached up and lightly cupped his face, then rose up on her toes to gently kiss him. It was a benediction, and acceptance. Then she tipped her own head back and pulled him close. He bit deep, and she felt like the first time. Frightened, awed, enraptured. LaCroix accepted her surrender, and she his domination.

LaCroix stopped and moved Janette to sit on her red velvet couch. He wiped the blood from his mouth, then reached out to catch a dribble on her chin. She watched him with solemn eyes.

"Will you come back, Janette?"

This time it was a request, not a demand, and she acquiesced with a nod. His look was triumphant, with only the barest hint of tyranny. Perhaps this time it would work. Perhaps now, they would achieve the unity they had only grasped at before. If only Nicola could accept it.

Her eyes clouded as she thought of her golden knight. His tortured soul and fruitless attempts to regain salvation and mortality.

"He will come back to us, Janette. Already he is returning to what he was meant to be. It's only a matter of time."

Janette reached out a hesitant hand to touch his arm. "Will you share with him what you did with me?"

"In time, my dear. He is not ready for that yet. He can barely face what he is, much less what I am. He is much more fragile than you. He has such conflict in him. It will take time and patience, and your love."

But he loves another, she thought silently.

Again, LaCroix read her thoughts.

"He only thinks he does. We both know who was destined for him, and as charming and intelligent a woman Dr. Lambert is, she cannot meet his needs, nor can she regain his mortality. Pity. She would be a fine vampire."

The sudden hot glow in Janette's eyes made LaCroix chuckle.

"You have a rival for Nicolas's affections, a mortal one, and that will be difficult, but not impossible, to overcome."

"How?" she asked.

"Time will bring answers. I have plans, you see."

Her eyebrow arched in a very familiar gesture. LaCroix saw his own mannerisms and smiled. Her silent question went unanswered.

"You'll know, when the time comes. I must go and make arrangements. We leave Toronto in three days."

Three days to break down the mortal world she had crafted. Three days to regain Nicola and rejoin her vampire family. Three days until LaCroix assumed control over them utterly and completely. She swallowed a bit as she realized the magnitude of her decision.

"It is destiny, Janette. We belong together."

She looked up at him as he walked to the door, and accepted. After he left, she pulled down the silk Afghan and wrapped it around herself as she stretched out on the couch to sleep. She hummed the ancient music she and LaCroix had danced to and drifted into the arms of Morpheus. She felt... loved.

Chapter 12

Nicolas knew that the time had finally come. Past time, in fact. The late afternoon sunlight was streaming through his window, illuminating the sleeping features of the woman on his couch. Not much longer until sunset. Natalie slept on with the deep exhaustion of a 36 hours plus at the lab and library, then staying up with him. She had tried so very hard to keep his spirits up, to keep him from crossing to the 'dark side'. And she had searched feverishly for a cure, but nothing she had come up with had worked. She had tried her best, but there were some things that couldn't be conquered by love and faith alone.

Nicolas felt almost calm, now that his decision had been made. He could not end his own existence, whether due to personal conviction, survival or the eternal need for salvation. Or fear of becoming nothing, cast in the pit of darkness for a million eternities. He couldn't torture his mortal love with the uncertainty of his condition. He would have to move on, and so would she, if she were ever to find the love she deserved. It was one of the

hardest things he would ever do, but sacrifice wasn't a new concept to him. Then, too, was the frightening ease with which he became reacquainted with the dark urges deep inside himself. He had thought himself so noble and penitent, so righteously grief-stricken by leaving mortality behind, yet the old stirrings came back so easily. He silently saluted LaCroix with his wine glass. *Touche, Father. You knew all along that I would have to return to you.*

Then Nick looked back at Natalie, remorse overcoming him. He would not be the cause of her unhappiness. He wasn't what she thought he was, a noble man seeking redemption. He was a vampire. Nick stared at the colors playing through her auburn hair, his voice was deep and painful whisper:

*"May you live out your life
Without hate, without grief,
And your hair ever blaze,
In the sun, in the sun,
When I am undone,
When I am no one." **

* Theodore Roethke "Prayer for a Young Wife"

He shut his eyes against the sting of tears. She would sleep and not waken for hours. If the exhaustion wasn't enough, the sleeping pill he had put in her tea would. a sorry trick to play, but he couldn't let her interfere with what he knew was best for her. And despite her protestations, he *did* know what was best. You can't live for eight hundred years and not learn something about the human condition.

"Too bad I couldn't hypnotize you, Nat. It would have been so much easier."

She slept on as the sun began its downward journey and the shadows lengthened. So little time left. He just wanted a few hours to watch her in the daylight, yet stay safe in the shadows. To remember.

"I'm not as strong as you are, Natalie. You'll weather this and move on. You'll fall in love again, and when you tell stories to your grandchildren, you'll smile a bit when you tell them about the strange man you had met so many years ago." He paused, his expression quite serious. "I do love you, Nat. I haven't shown it very well, and I never said it. But it's not enough to bridge the gap." She didn't stir. He wondered if she could even hear him. Perhaps she'd think it was all a dream.

The sun set, and Nick gathered his jacket, pausing for a moment to kiss her gently. It was time to go. His resignation from the police department lay on his desk, and his only regret was not being able to say goodbye personally to Schanke. Perhaps a letter, or a quick phone call. He had left his

partner a valuable painting, one that would pay Jenny's college tuition and the remainder of the Schanke household mortgage, but it was a poor substitute for human feelings. *Eight hundred years, and I still haven't learned how to say goodbye.*

He took the stairs and once outside rose into the night sky. The stars were brilliant tonight. The moon was a slender crescent. He flew to the Raven, where Janette waited for him. The club was empty and the music stilled. Moving the chains aside, he walked to her and caught her in a strong embrace. Neither spoke a word, and they communed silently.

"He's coming now, Nicola," Janette said softly. "Have you made your decision?"

"Yes, though he saw to it that we'd have no choice at all."

"There can be happiness in this."

"If we follow his rules, and don't defy him," Nick stated simply.

"There are always rules to be followed. I would like to believe that LaCroix

has changed for the better. We are a family, Nicola."

Turning his face to her, he swallowed and then nodded.

"I'll go back to him, Janette. I tried to break away, but maybe it's too soon. I need to learn more about myself, about us. Perhaps when I'm as old as our master, I'll have the strength to break away. There's always a chance, Janette."

She shook her head sadly, and leaned into his chest again. Nicola was clinging to his dreams despite everything. How long would it be before LaCroix broke him, brought him to heel and crushed the fiery spirit and determination that had attracted them to him to begin with? Or tricked him into complacency? He wouldn't be the same without his rebellions.

Do you really want this, LaCroix? To mold him into a replica of you, with no mind or heart of his own?

"Not at all, Janette," came the dragon whisper close to her ear. "I imagine both of you will rebel just enough to keep my life interesting. What's the sport in dealing with total obedience?"

The memory of their respective punishments surfaced in both Nick's and Janette's eyes. LaCroix's mocking smile faded as he glimpsed them.

"There will be no need for that, my children. You know the rules, and I hardly need to resort to physical violence at this point."

Not at all. Your punishments are much more sophisticated and refined than they were eight hundred years ago. Just the suggestion of what you might do is enough, Janette thought silently.

"But of course," LaCroix said mockingly, "So that your lives will not become boring either."

This was more the old LaCroix, the one who had effortlessly terrorized his children over the centuries. The beast was still there. LaCroix caught the brief flash of fear and disappointment on Janette's face. His gaze softened slightly.

"The good with the bad, my dear. You know that."

She closed her eyes briefly, then nodded. They might not become a perfect happy little family, but they could do worse. They had already done much, much worse.

"Did you decide what you wanted to do about your time here, Nicolas?"

"You said that one day I would love a mortal as much as you loved Fleur, and that you would take her from me. You've managed to do that without actually taking her away."

Nick went and leaned over the bar, bracing his outstretched arms against the cool surface. "You've won, LaCroix. You've made me pay the ultimate price. Not only do I give up my search for mortality, but I give up my love for Natalie. Your revenge is complete." For the first time, Nick's eyes filled and pooled over. One by one, little red drops fell against the surface of the bar.

LaCroix came over and grasped Nicolas firmly by the back of his neck, forcing his son to look at him.

"I have no need for this type of vengeance. I have Arielle, Janette and you. I do not need to hurt you in addition to bringing you back to me."

Nick clearly did not believe him.

"It's the truth, Nicolas. You did what you had to do to move on, however much it hurt. Why would I offer to erase these painful memories if I wanted to punish you?"

"Because you knew I would refuse, and so I'd have to live with the pain forever."

"Nicolas, Nicolas. Do you think I would allow you to brood for eternity, always bitter and unhappy, or let you move on?"

"I don't know. With you, I never really know."

"Let me help you, Nicolas. I can take all your memory of this time away, or just a small portion of it. I can stop your pain, for when you hurt, I hurt as well."

"That's never stopped you before."

"True, but things are different now. Or we would not be here together."

Nick reached up to clear his blurred eyes, but LaCroix reached out before he could complete the gesture and carefully wiped the liquid from his son's eyes. The gesture was infinitely tender and Nick yielded to it. He had missed the affection that LaCroix had so infrequently bestowed on him. They had been some of the few bright spots in their long and complicated

relationship. He wanted a father, but not a master, yet LaCroix would always be both. Such was the nature of a vampire bond.

If he forgot Natalie, he would forget the humanity he still sought. No, he had to remember what light and hope she had brought him. He just had to forget the relationship they had been trying to build. Nick stared into the polished surface of the bar as if it were a magic mirror, then looked up at his creator.

"Then make me forget I loved her, and perhaps that would be enough."

"So be it, Nicolas."

LaCroix's eyes captured his son's, and Nicolas felt the power of LaCroix's will moving over him. He nearly panicked as he recalled how LaCroix had overtaken him after the burning, but LaCroix merely shook his head slightly. Nick calmed himself and allowed the master vampire inside his mind. Yielding, he gave into LaCroix's suggestion. He descended into the cool depths of a turquoise grotto, peaceful and calm. The pain and grief left him with a gentle ripple. His memories and thoughts were an open book for LaCroix to peruse, and LaCroix used the opportunity with ruthlessness. Nick was unaware of Janette watching them from her office doorway. After an indefinite period, that could have been seconds or hours, LaCroix stepped back. Nick stared at him, slightly disoriented.

"How are you feeling Nicolas?"

"I, um, I must have drifted off for a second."

"You must be tired, Nicolas. You should feed, and then rest. We will be leaving Toronto tonight."

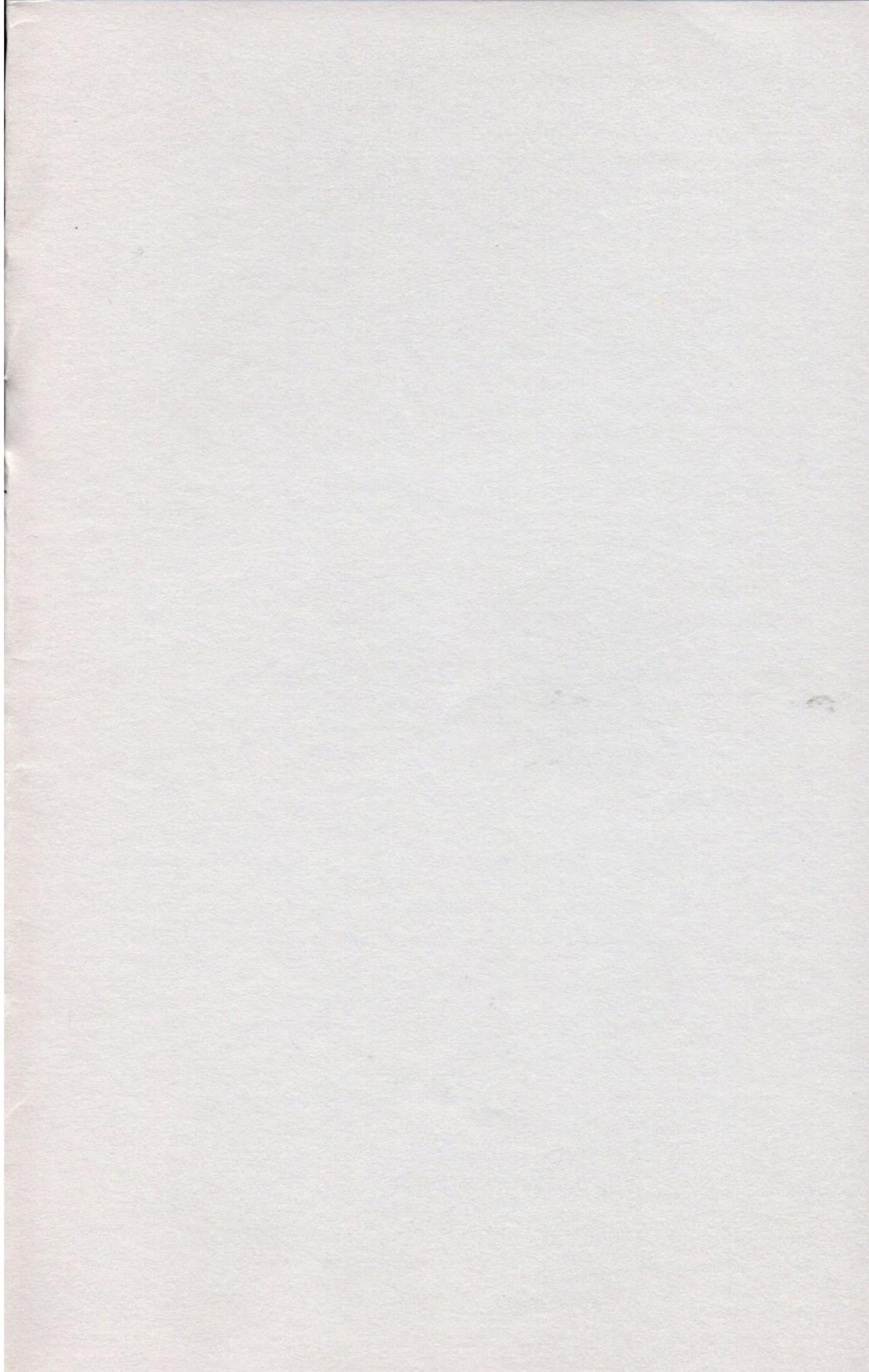
"Nicola," Janette purred as she embraced him, their lips meeting in a passionate kiss. The one obstacle Janette had been unable to overcome was gone, and Nick reacted predictably. Janette felt a flimmer of regret for the female coroner's loss, but then stared up at the only man she would ever love. Janette closed her eyes as she deepened her embrace. *This time, Nicola, I will not let you go.*

LaCroix sat down on the bar stool and contemplated the various things that would need to be done. Selling local properties, arranging for shipping of furniture. Finding a new home. And eventually dealing with the good doctor. No doubt she would be quite angry after Nicolas leaving her so abruptly. *That will be trouble, but then, boredom is one of my little problems with eternity anyway. Ah, Nicolas, you still haven't figured out how to handle an intelligent woman.* LaCroix had the certain feeling that they would see Dr. Lambert again. What an interesting wrinkle that would put in their relationships. But, first things first.

LaCroix felt a slight presence and looked to see a shimmer in the air above the chandeliers. *Is this what you wanted? All of us together again?* The spirit moved over him like some sweet fragrance, and LaCroix felt her

approval. *You're leaving now. I know that. Where will you be, Fleur? In the heaven you believed in?* The spirit lingered, and LaCroix felt her love. It didn't answer the question, he hadn't really expected it to, but it was enough. With that, he bid a silent final farewell to the shade, knowing it was time for him to move on. The presence faded away, leaving only a light rose scent to mark that it had been there at all.

LaCroix looked up to see Arielle peeping at him from through the door, her face solemn. He beckoned her and she crossed the floor to stand before him. Even sitting he seemed to tower over her. Yet now, oddly enough, that didn't seem to terrorize her any longer. She reached out to him and he grasped her hands. They stared at each other for endless minutes. Suddenly Fleur's smile shone through her, then faded, becoming Arielle's once more. Wrapping his arms around Arielle, he stood silent as he watched Janette and Nicolas. The final prize was his. He had his family again. It was done.





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